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"*VIOLET RISES* AND SPREADS OUT HER SKIRTS, STEPPING BACK A LITTLE."

VIOLET VEREKER'S VANITY

BY

ANNIE E. ARMSTRONG

Author of "Three Bright Girls", "A Very Odd Girl", &c.

WITH SIX ILLUSTRATIONS BY G. DEMAIN HAMMOND

LONDON

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VIOLET VEREKER'S VANITY.

CHAPTER I.

A FAMILY PARTY.

THE day had been insufferably hot, and the sun, pouring its scorching rays down upon the already baked and parched grass, had robbed it of the last slight tinge of green left to it by the many weeks of dry, warm weather which had set in as far back as March. All the rivers round about had long ago been reduced to mere brooklets, while the brooks themselves, usually so bustling and business-like, had in their turn narrowed and dwindled down to tiny rills, in which scarcely any movement at all could be discerned. As for the ponds, they had been things of the past for quite a fortnight or more; and the ducks, who generally lorded it over their meaner brethren, the cocks

and hens, by reason of their superiority in the matter of aquatic performances, were now only too glad to throw in their fortunes with the common herd, and thankfully take modest little dips out of the varied assortment of old pots and cans set down in the poultry-yard for the entertainment of the aforesaid cocks and hens. Indeed, one of the last-named, a lady of uncertain age, who had assumed a sort of authority over all the other inmates of the yard, had been heard to remark to a garrulous old rooster, much given to standing on one leg, that the pride of "those ducks, who seem to think themselves everybody, had been quite taken down lately, and that they were growing quite sociable and homely-like".

If, however, the fields and open country round about The Willows had suffered so greatly from heat and want of rain, the wide sweep of lawn with its pretty, sloping banks in front of the house, and also the tennis lawn further round, between the flower and kitchen gardens, were better off. For with two gardeners and a boy, and a hose of unlimited length, surely some watering could be done; and, as a matter of fact, these three seemed always hard at work with that useful

appliance, either at one end of the garden or the other, keeping the grass wet and emerald-like, and vastly refreshing to the eyes of the tired master, when, after a long day's work in London, he would be driven home in the light dogcart from the somewhat distant station.

In the drawing-room of The Willows sits a family party; father, mother, and two daughters. The dinner has met with but scant attention this evening; for who cares to sip scalding soup or eat fried fish,—which holds the heat in so deceptive a manner,—with the thermometer standing at 87° in the shade. So the different courses have been hurried through, and with one accord the party has fled to the drawing-room, which, if not cool, is at any rate less hot than the dining-room. A petulant sigh, from the neighbourhood of a lounge at the other end of the room, presently attracts the attention of Mrs. Vereker, where she sits by one of the open windows, making heroic efforts to continue some light needlework.

"My dear Violet," she says, without turning in her chair, "I do wish you would get something to do! To my certain knowledge you have done nothing but sit on that lounge and sigh ever since we came in from dinner."

"I can't help it," replies the young lady, with something of a flounce; "it's so hot!"

"I do not think any of us need reminding of that, my love," says Mrs. Vereker, smiling. "But as to your general state of 'ennui', as you yourself would put it, I suppose, you will not feel either that or the heat half so much if you occupy yourself with something. Look at Cinthy; she is wrapped up in her book, and perfectly happy; and so is your father with his *Saturday*. Why don't you get a book?"

"There is nothing worth reading!" says Violet with a pout, which, however, is instantly changed into a toss of her chin on hearing a merry laugh from a secluded corner behind her.

"Now, what are you laughing at, Cinthy?" she demands, turning sharply round. "It is no business of yours, one way or the other. I wish you would remember that you are younger than me!"

"Than *me*?" queries the girl, with lifted eyebrows. "Why don't you brush up your grammar, Vi? As to your being the elder, you are not likely to let me forget that fact. Not that it matters to me in the very least; you are quite welcome to the honour, for I would just as soon be the younger as not. Wait till Lady Fairfax

arrives! You won't dare try to queen it over everybody then."

A hearty laugh from Mr. Vereker does not tend to soothe the ruffled feelings of the injured young lady, and turning her back on both father and sister, she moves away with a stately air towards the door.

Before she can turn the handle, however, the door is flung open from the other side, with such violence that Violet, to the detriment of her dignity, is forced to hastily retire backwards, while confronting her stands a curly-headed youth, gasping and panting with excitement.

"Hallo! what's the row?" he demands, looking first at his indignant sister and then over her shoulder to his father, who is still shaking with suppressed laughter. "Why, she's crying!" he exclaims, looking wildly over to his mother. "Vi has got tears in her eyes, I'll be jiggered if she hasn't!"

"I haven't!" exclaims Violet hotly, and struggling for composure, while Mrs. Vereker throws a warning look to her son. "You made me jump, that's all. And please don't bring your school slang into the drawing-room, Geoff; it is not at all suitable."

"Well, I'm blessed!" says the boy, thrusting his hands into his pockets, and staring with some surprise at the angry, flushed face before him. Here's a nice reception to give a fellow; when he's primed with the latest news, too!"

"News!" cry both Violet and Hyacinth in a breath, while Mr. Vereker drops his paper to his knees, and the work falls from Mrs. Vereker's fingers.

"Yes, news!" repeats Geoff deliberately, as he seats himself near the open window by his mother, and helps himself to the fan lying in her lap. "News of the first water, too! Ah, ha! Miss Violet, I thought that would have a soothing effect on your temper! You are looking quite sweet and amiable now, and as if you couldn't say 'Bo' to the proverbial goose. I say, Mater, is there any lemonade left?"

"You can ring and ask, dear. Or, stay; tea will be coming in directly. Wouldn't you like a cup of tea?"

"No, thanks, not I, on an evening like this! No, I'll go and see what I can find in the dining-room. Perhaps they have left some ice there."

"Oh, but what about the news?" inquires Violet,

who is now sitting quite serenely on the end of a sofa. "You are not going till you have told us that."

"Am I not, though? The news will wait, Miss Vi, but my thirst won't; at any rate I don't mean to let it; and so, dear sister, *au revoir*."

"Selfish creature!" mutters Violet, as the door closes upon her brother. "Why couldn't he tell us this news and have his drink after? Oh, here comes tea! Who will pour out? Will you, Cinthy?"

"No," replies the girl promptly; "it is your duty, Vi; besides Mother says I always put too much sugar in her tea."

"It is so hot!" grumbles Violet, looking first at her sister and then at the tea-tray with a deprecating movement of her eyebrows.

"Oh, very well!" cries Cinthy, jumping up and closing her book with a snap, close to Violet's woe-begone face.

"Oh, don't, Cinthy!" cries that young lady irritably. "How can you be so frightfully energetic in heat like this? I declare you have made me hotter than ever."

Hyacinth laughs as she seats herself at the tea-table and busies herself amongst the cups.

"You want waking up a bit, my dear," she remarks sagely. "Mother is quite right; if you were to do more work you wouldn't feel the heat half so much."

"You need not trouble to air your opinions on the subject, Cinthy. What Mother has said is sufficient."

At this moment the door opens and Geoff enters, apparently refreshed with his drink of iced lemonade.

"Well, what is your news? Do tell us!" cries Violet, in a fever of expectation.

"All right. Pray calm yourself! I am going to tell you as soon as I have had a cup of tea. 'Patience and water-gruel', you know, Vi—. Ah, thank you, Cinthy! Have you given me lots of sugar?" And Geoff calmly stirs and drinks his tea, quite oblivious of the entreating glances his sister casts towards him as she leans forward from her chair, with clasped hands and eager eyes, waiting to hear the news.

"Well," says Geoff, leisurely putting down his cup; "you know that the new people's furniture has been coming in all day at The Towers, I suppose; and I suppose you know also that the new people's name is Sugden?"

A nod from everyone is the answer, Violet adding, "Well?"

"Yes, Sugden," repeats the boy deliberately. "Do you, any of you, happen to be familiar with the name?"

"Not more than with any other," remarks Hyacinth indifferently.

"Oh, yes, you are!" cries Geoff, clasping his hands round his knee, and lolling back in his chair. "You are as familiar with it as you are with your own, if you only think a minute. Have you never heard of 'Sugden's Soap'? This sort of thing, you know: 'Sugden's Soap is best, cheapest, and goes furthest'."

"Geoffrey, what are you talking about?" cries Hyacinth excitedly, while Violet simply gasps. "These are not the soap people!"

"They are, though. You might as well call them tallow people, while you are about it, Cinthy," this with a palpable wink in Violet's direction, "because there is heaps of tallow in all soaps, you know."

Violet looks appealingly at her father.

"It is not true, Papa; is it?"

"Yes, my dear, I believe it is. But why are you looking so shocked? Why should it not be true?"

"Why, Papa, they are only common tradespeople, then!"

"Tut, tut, child; you must not talk like that! Good honest trade is thought nearly as much of as anything else in these days. What is brewing but a trade? And look at our Lord this and Lord that—recent peers, I grant you—but they stand side by side with our old nobility, and in most cases they are worthy of that high privilege, for they are honourable, upright men, and some of them have done inestimable good with their wealth. My dear Violet, if our good Queen thinks these men worthy of the honour she has conferred upon them, surely you can tolerate them."

Geoffrey and Hyacinth, whom Violet is fond of accusing of cherishing quite Socialistic ideas, warmly nod their approval of Mr. Vereker's sentiments, but the elder girl only shrugs her shoulders.

"What do you think of it, Mother?"

"How, my dear? What do you mean?"

"Why, shall you take any notice of them?"

"Of course; everyone will do that. I cannot say yet whether I shall be actually on friendly terms with the family, but of that I shall be better able to judge when I have called

"Mother, you are never going to call!"

"Certainly, I shall call, Violet, when the right time comes."

"But—but, that will be like seeking them!" gasps Violet, becoming more and more scandalized at this lamentable want of pride in her parents.

Mrs. Vereker simply smiles at her daughter's horrified expression, but the father breaks into a hearty laugh, which he does not take the trouble to subdue.

"Upon my word!" he cries, "I believe Violet thinks the whole family goes up to town every morning in order to stand behind the counter and actually sell the soap in person! Now, as a matter of fact, Vi, the father of this family has had very little to do with the business since he married, and the sons—there are several, I hear—still less. It was the grandfather, old Mr. Peter Sugden, who amassed the great fortune which his son and grandsons are enjoying now; and, although he may not be so highly educated as his son and grandsons, I know this, that not a warmer heart than his beats within the breast of man. I was talking this afternoon to Maitland on this very subject," continues Mr. Vereker, turning to his

wife. "He got into the same carriage with me, and travelled as far as Bromley. It seems he knows all about the Sugdens, and it was from him that I learnt what I have just told you. He finished up by calling them a charming family. Ah, yes! I forgot one thing, though; something that may even induce the fastidious and exclusive Miss Violet Vereker to condescend to know the family—"

"Don't, Papa," says Violet, in a low tone.

"And that is," continues her father, "that Mr. John Sugden married a lady of rank—the Honourable Constance Dalrymple, I think she was! So you see, my dear Violet, she was not too proud to have anything to do with the family, eh?"

"Ah! but that doesn't do away with the tallow and soap, does it, Vi?" inquires Geoffrey, as he tilts back his chair and helps himself to sugar *ad lib.* "Soap is generally supposed to have a soothing effect; but evidently it has quite an opposite one on our respected sister Violet. I should say," putting his head on one side, and regarding his sister meditatively, "that it has a distinctly roughening—or shall we put it more prettily, and say ruffling—effect upon her?"

But these last remarks prove altogether too

much for poor Violet, and treating her brother to one of her own peculiar glances of contempt, she gets up rather quickly from her chair.

"I think I will go to bed, Mother," she says, stooping for her good-night kiss. "It is so hot, and my head aches, and—and I don't think I am particularly wanted down here. Perhaps it will be cooler upstairs."

"Well, my dear," remarks Mr. Vereker, patting his daughter's face as she raises it for a kiss, "if you are really tired, go to bed, by all means; but don't talk nonsense about not being 'particularly wanted', because it *is* nonsense, you know. You must learn to take Geoff's chaffing in a better spirit, Vi. The lad means no harm by it. Why, bless my soul, he actually dares to chaff the Mother and myself sometimes! Think of that. Why, it was only yesterday he said he considered I was too old to wear a straw hat, and followed it up by inquiring if I was going up to town in it. What do you think of that for impudence, eh? You should turn round upon him as Cinthy does. He always gets paid back by Cinthy; ah, and with interest too!"

"Cinthy does not mind chaffing and teasing, and I do." And not condescending to take any

notice of either sister or brother, Violet takes her departure.

"What a pity it is," says Mrs. Vereker, as the door closes on her daughter, "that Violet is so proud and touchy! I really feel quite anxious about her sometimes."

"Oh, you need not be anxious, my dear!" says Mr. Vereker, getting up and walking over to the window; "Violet will grow wiser as she grows older. In my opinion, the child is sadly wanting in what I call pride: that proper, high-minded feeling which does credit to anybody. Violet's so-called pride is pure narrow-mindedness! Nothing more nor less! Well, you will have to see that she is civil to these people, Mother. In the ordinary course of things she must be thrown into their company, more or less; but for goodness sake, Mary, don't let her think she is going to patronize them—anything rather than that!"

When Cinthy presently goes up to the room which she and Violet share, she finds her sister pretending to be asleep, though the quick-eyed girl sees at once that she is not, from the quivering of the other's eyelids.

"You needn't pretend to be asleep," Hyacinth remarks, seating herself on the side of the bed,

"because I can see that you are not. Come, open your eyes, Vi; I want to talk to you."

"Oh, I wish you wouldn't bother, Cinthy! If I'm not actually asleep, I am sleepy; and my head aches, too."

"Hum! you wouldn't say that if it was your beloved Amy who was sitting here!" and Cinthy moves off the bed, looking hurt and, for her, almost cross.

"What nonsense, Cinthy. It is only that I am tired, and—and perhaps cross. You and Geoff do tease so. You all seem to have taken up such queer ideas about these people who are coming here, too. It is enough to make anyone cross, I think. I can't imagine where your pride is, and I am quite surprised at Father and Mother. If they do visit at The Towers, I shall not know how to face the Lawrences. They are so awfully particular and—and exclusive."

"Well, don't face them!" says Hyacinth tranquilly, as she shakes down her curly gold locks. "For my part, I can't think what you see in them. Mrs. Lawrence does nothing but lie on the sofa reading novels, and scold her servants, through the live-long day. As for Bertie—my gracious! it absolutely makes me shudder when

I think of his high collars, his dandy little cane, smart patent-leather shoes, and that aggressive little eye-glass, which never will stay in his eye! Pah, I've no patience!" and Hyacinth falls to brushing her hair with a violence which fairly startles the quiet and more deliberate Violet.

After a few seconds of hard brushing, the brush is laid down again with a bang.

"There is Amy herself, too, though I grant you she is clever in her way, and can make herself agreeable when she chooses; but she is as conceited as she can hang together, and, when she pleases, as stuck up and—and horrid as any cockatoo! She sings like one, too."

"I was not aware that cockatoos did sing," remarks Violet.

"Oh, well, if they don't sing they scream; and that is what your friend Amy does!"

"You are very complimentary to all my friends, I think, Cinthy. The fact is you are jealous, I believe, because you are not asked to The Châlet more often, and because you did not dine there the other evening!"

"Dine there!" cries Hyacinth, sinking into a chair and gasping. "As if I wanted to dine with the Lawrences! Why, I would rather dine with

the sweep, any day! One would be sure of his keeping his place, and not trying to lord it over his betters—as they are always doing."

"Well, they seem to have plenty of money at any rate!" says Violet.

"Ah! but 'money don't make the gentleman, Miss Voilet', as old Gaffer said to you the other day. And I reckon he's about right. I cannot bear people who pretend to be what they are not, and that, it seems to me, is what the Lawrences are always striving at. I am sure I don't want to be ill-natured," Hyacinth adds, getting out of her chair and resuming her operations of hair brushing, "and if I have hurt your feelings with anything I have said, I am very sorry. I do hate humbug of any sort though, and sometimes I can't help showing it. However, I did not wake you up for this sort of conversation, Vi; I came to tell you what Papa said about getting a window for the royal wedding."

"Oh, what does he say?" inquires Violet, throwing her slumberous feelings to the winds, and sitting up in bed with energy.

"Well, he says he has already been to see about a window, near Charing Cross somewhere: only he has not decided anything yet. He considered

they asked too much for it, but the head man was not in, so he, I mean Papa, is to call again."

"Well, and what about the Henley Regatta?"

"Oh, I couldn't get him to attend to that much! He said there was plenty of time, and that he would see, &c., &c., and then Gaffer got hold of him about those new orchids, and—*voilà tout!* Now, Violet, I am ready for bed; that is, when I have said my prayers; so you have my gracious permission to go to sleep."

And Hyacinth kneels down beside her little white bed, while perfect silence pervades the room.

CHAPTER II.

HOBBIES.

VIOLET is up and out betimes on the following morning; out in the sheltered little nook under the south wall, which is her own particular property. For Violet has a hobby, and that hobby is a passion for horticulture of every description, and in this small, compact, little garden may be seen the earliest snowdrops; the first of her own sweet namesakes; the finest primroses, followed later in the spring by gaudy-coloured tulips; pale,

heavily-scented hyacinths, and tall, majestic lilies. Then come the brighter and less delicate flowers of summer, and following them in their turn, the still hardier blossoms which tell us that summer is waning, autumn at hand, and winter creeping round, slowly but surely.

But Violet has lately taken up another hobby, which, however, deserves a better name, perhaps; for a noble and useful study, which is destined to be of service to others, may not be spoken of so lightly and carelessly as one which is simply pleasing to our senses.

It had come about in this way. A few months previously, a course of ambulance lectures had been announced to take place in the neighbourhood, and Violet, with a thirst for any knowledge outside the pale of what is usually considered necessary to a young girl's education, had been fired with an earnest desire to attend them. So after some little discussion, Mr. Vereker had given his permission, provided his wife consented also.

"Oh, I am sure Mother will agree!" cried Violet enthusiastically. "She always says a doctor's profession is such a noble and unselfish one!—and so it is. And it will be delightful to feel that I can be of some small use in the world. One never

can tell what may happen! There might be war, and this very neighbourhood might be the scene of one of the battles; and then, just think how useful I should be!"

"I'll be jiggered if she isn't already hard at work in the battlefield in her own thoughts!" cried Geoffrey, laying down his knife and fork and looking over at his sister's flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. "Anyone can see by her face that she can even hear the cries of the wounded and the groans of the dying! I say, Vi, why don't you go in for army surgeon at once? You'd get a chance of some work of that sort then! Well, you don't catch me letting you practice on me—understand that, please!"

So Violet duly attended the lectures, and in course of time became a very competent little amateur surgeon. One of her first moves had been to establish a small hospital for wounded beasts and birds in an empty stall of the stable; and here she would doctor them and nurse them back to health with a tender patience and solicitude which quite staggered her young brother.

On the morning in question, Violet, having given a careful eye to her garden and greenhouse, turns her steps towards the hospital, the

chief patients in which at the present moment are a puppy with a torn ear—the consequence of a desperate encounter with the turkey cock—a fine cat, who in one of his prowling expeditions had come to grief in a trap, and an old duck with a broken leg. Having ascertained that all three of the sufferers are progressing favourably, the girl slowly makes her way back to the house, humming as she goes. Her headache of the night before has quite taken its departure, and it does not seem quite so terribly hot, since there is now a fresh little breeze stirring; and altogether Violet feels ten per cent happier this morning, and equal even to the rather liberal amount of teasing and chaffing which Geoff, the irrepressible, generally treats his sisters to.

Turning a corner rather suddenly, she runs full tilt against Cinthy, who is attired in a big black apron, freely besprinkled with great white daubs of some plastery kind of substance; while her face, which is flushed with excitement, is likewise adorned with little streaks and dabs of the same material, which show up grandly on the bright, rosy complexion.

For Cinthy, not to be outdone by Violet, had set up an opposition hobby—that of modelling

and real sculpture!—the specimens of which, as shown in an attic which the youthful sculptor dignifies with the name of "atelier", may well inspire wonder if not admiration in the hearts of those who are venturesome enough to trust themselves amongst its ghastly contents.

"Oh, there you are!" cries the sculptor, wiping her hands on her apron. "What a time you have been over your flowers this morning; I have been looking for you everywhere. Do come up to the atelier with me; I've nearly finished that bust of Papa, and I want your opinion on it. I really think it is awfully like him; only I am afraid the nose is too aquiline—no, I believe I mean Roman! any way, it is hooked—and I don't believe Papa's nose is hooked. I am afraid, too, that one eye is just the tiniest trifle lower than the other, and Geoff says it makes the whole thing—the face I mean—look perfectly imbecile! I wish you would come and say what you think, Violet. Geoff is so horribly discouraging, and until he made that sweeping assertion just now I thought I had quite caught Papa's expression."

By this time the girls have climbed the stairs leading to the attic, in which, upon a rough deal table, reposes the bust referred to.

"Well, what do you think of it?" inquires Cinthy anxiously.

Violet puts her head on one side and critically surveys the effigy of her parent.

"Do you think it a good likeness, Cinthy?"

"Well, ye-es; I think it is in some respects. Why? don't you?"

"Yes, oh, yes; in some respects, as you say, dear. I think the collar, and—and the hair are awfully good, really, Cinthy. But—" reflectively—"I don't think it is what you would call a flattering likeness, perhaps!"

And then both girls look at each other and burst out laughing.

"Are you going to show it to Papa?" asks Violet, recovering herself first.

"Oh, my goodness me, no! Whatever would he say?"

At this instant they hear their father's step upon the stairs. "Oh, my gracious, there he is!" cries Cinthy excitedly. "Quick, Violet! help me to cover it up." But before they can lay their hands upon a cloth Mr. Vereker is in the room, and in another instant comes to a standstill before the deal table.

"Whom have we here?" he asks, with extreme

gravity. "Is it Socrates, or the King of the Cannibal Islands, or who? It is ugly enough for His Satanic Majesty himself!"

"My dear Pater, you will hurt our sculptor's feelings if you talk thus recklessly," exclaims a laughing voice behind them. "That head," continues Geoffrey, coming round into sight, "is supposed to be a true and genuine copy of your own. I am sure you must feel flattered! it is so handsome!"

Mr. Vereker's reply is to go off into a hearty peal of laughter, while Cinthy, having first dumbly threatened her brother with future extermination, by means of energetic wavings of hands and lowering of brows, turns crimson, and then joins in the general laugh.

"Well," says Mr. Vereker, standing still with his hands clasped behind him; "I don't think anyone can accuse me of being a vain man; but even in my wildest dreams I have not credited myself with quite so much ugliness as this thing represents!" And he tips the nose of the image quite disrespectfully.

"Look there! that's a fine nose to give anyone; and your own father, too! Why, it looks more like the handle of a jug than anything! Ha! ha!

Well, you have flattered your old father this time, and no mistake, Miss Cinthy!" and pinching his daughter's pink ear, he goes off into a fresh burst of laughter.

"We thought the hair—and the collar were very good;" remarks Violet, a little dubiously, anxious to put in a word for her sister's doubtful work, though secretly glad that she is now coming in for her share of teasing and chaffing.

"The collar and the hair, eh? Well, yes; they are not at all bad. And in that consists the excellent likeness, I suppose, eh? Here, Violet, here's a letter for you. Which of your young lady acquaintances has the bad taste to use such a huge, gaudy monogram as that?" And he hands his daughter an envelope with a great 'A. L.' emblazoned on it in one corner, in blue and gold, while on the back is "The Châlet", in gold letters. "But there, I need not have asked the question; it is from your friend Amy Lawrence, I suppose?"

"Yes, Papa," says Violet briefly; for she is already deep in the contents of the letter.

But here a sudden diversion is caused by Hyacinth, who, having gradually backed Geoff into a corner, now stands before that young gentle-

man with uplifted, threatening hands, which are covered with a sticky substance.

"You be jiggered, Cinthy!" he gasps, between his bursts of laughter. "Get out of the light, will you? Here, Violet, Pater, come and take her away, somebody. Get away, Cinthy. I'll scream 'murder' if you touch me with those hands!"

"So you may!" cries the girl, dancing a kind of war-dance before her victim. "And you can add 'thieves' if you like! It doesn't matter in the least to me; only you are not going until I have made you look like a powdered beauty. Come and help me hold him, Vi."

And Violet, remembering her grievances of the night before, goes; and there ensues such a scuffling and scrimmaging that Mr. Vereker declares he has never before heard its equal. Then in a few seconds, Geoff emerges from the custody of his tormentors with a face as completely white as the much-abused figure reclining on the table.

"I'll pay you both out for this, be jiggered if I don't!" cries the boy wrathfully, while he tries in vain to wipe off the white with his pocket handkerchief.

"Well, we are quits now, all of us," says Cinthy delightedly resuming her war-dance.

"Doesn't he look beautiful, Dad? Let us take him down and show him to Mother!"

"No, I'm bothered if you do!" exclaims the boy, bursting away from his sisters. And rushing out of the room, he goes down the stairs with a bound, while the father, with an arm round each of his daughters, follows more leisurely to breakfast.

CHAPTER III.

"A HOUSE DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF."

IT will be gathered from some foregoing remarks that Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence of The Châlet—and more particularly the latter,—had a much more exalted opinion of their own importance than had anyone else. To be sure, they were visited by the neighbouring families, and social civilities were exchanged with punctilious regularity. But no one appeared to be on really intimate terms with them, and of the Vereker family Violet alone called them "friends". No one seemed quite to know who or what they were, beyond the fact that Mr. Lawrence was "something in the city"; and though the costly furnishing and lavish expenditure up at The

Châlet had been the talk of everyone, when, about a year before, they had appeared in the neighbourhood one day, as suddenly as mushrooms, it was soon easy to see that they were living above their station, if not beyond their means.

Hyacinth's portraits of the Lawrence family the night before had been pretty true to life, on the whole. But perhaps the most correct of all was that of Amy, a girl of about Violet's own age, and her very particular friend.

Brought up as she had been, in an atmosphere of forced "gentility" and ostentation, which almost amounted to vulgarity, it was little wonder that the worst side of her character should show when amidst her home surroundings. But, being a good girl in the main, and having, moreover, plenty of common-sense, she was able to estimate pretty accurately the value of the shallow, frivolous life which was being led at The Châlet, when comparing it with that of other families she visited, where the industrious and well-ordered household spoke more plainly than anything could, perhaps, of that real refinement and good breeding, which Mrs. Lawrence was ever vainly trying to assume.

A strong friendship had quickly sprung up

between Violet and Amy; but though this was highly approved by Mrs. Lawrence, Mrs. Vereker was a little doubtful as to the desirability of the intercourse. After a time, however, she could not help seeing that each was unconsciously exercising an influence for good over the other; for, while Violet (naturally disposed to be dreamy and romantic) was gradually becoming more practical under Amy's influence, the latter's manner had certainly softened under the influence of Violet, though many a speech and action of her friend's would still jar upon her sensitive ear at times.

The letter which Violet had received this morning contained an invitation to lunch at The Châlet, which she is something more than pleased to accept, since it will afford an opportunity to talk over the new arrivals at The Towers with her friend. About twelve o'clock, therefore, while Violet is donning her hat, a neat little pony carriage turns in at the gate, and is driven at a smart pace by a young lady up to the front door of The Willows. Beside the young lady is seated a young gentleman who—partly owing to the smallness of his stature, and partly to his occupying a lower seat—is very nearly extinguished by

the amplitude of his sister's attire, more particularly the large, full sleeves and flapping capes of her frock, and the vast hat which crowns a not very tidily-dressed head of hair.

"Get out and go to his head, Bert, will you?" asks Amy, when she has at length brought the rather tricky pony to a standstill.

"Oh, dash it, Amy! don't you know. He bit me the other day, and 'once bit, twice shy', don't you know. I don't mind holding the wibbons if you want to get out."

"Thanks," says Amy briefly, "I'd rather hold them myself."

But at this moment Violet appears, and, after a sound rating to her brother from Amy, for his lack of politeness in not getting out to hand her visitor into the carriage, the three drive off together in no very good cue, the one being sulky, the other cross, and the third, Violet, feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

When they reach The Châlet—where Mrs. Lawrence receives Violet with much *empressment*—things go better; and having taken off her hat in Amy's luxuriously-furnished bedroom, and duly admired several new frocks and hats, which have lately been added to the girl's already

extensive wardrobe, the two sit down together for a private and confidential chat before the gong for luncheon shall summon them downstairs.

"And now, tell me, dear," says Amy presently, "is it really true that these people who have come to The Towers are tradespeople?"

Violet gives a deprecative shrug of her shoulders.

"That is the very thing we were discussing last night after dinner. They have certainly been in trade, even if they are not now. But I believe they are very rich, and I fancy Mr. Sugden has retired from business. Someone told Father that they are nice people. 'A charming family' I believe he called them."

"Violet! did he really? How droll. Oh, there is the gong at last! Harvey is so dreadfully unpunctual. The meals get later every day. I do wish Mama would get rid of him. But she won't, I know, if it is only because he was once in service in the Duke of Devonshire's household. Come along, Vi, dear; I am dying for my luncheon!"

Arrived in the dining-room, they find a hot dispute going on between Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence as to the delinquencies of Harvey the butler.

"I thought I should just have time for a little luncheon before returning by the 2.50," says the master of the house, who stands at the head of the table with clouded brow, and watch in hand. "I kept the dog-cart waiting on purpose, and could easily have done it had the meal been punctual. Why don't you get rid of the fellow? Well, I suppose I must be off now."

And with a few hurried words to Violet, he hastily leaves the room, and in another minute is rattling down the drive in his dog-cart.

"Poor Papa!" remarks Amy, looking after him. "That comes of the shocking unpunctuality of our servants, you see, Mama."

"I have heard quite sufficient from your father on that subject, Amy," says her mother, with a frigid air. "I think it would be better taste to refrain from discussing the point before your visitor. Miss Vereker, may I help you to a cutlet, or will you try some of this chicken mayonnaise? The cutlets are done to death as usual, but my cook is celebrated for her mayonnaise. Ah! servants are a terrible trouble; does not your mother find them so?"

"Not that I know of, Mrs. Lawrence. At least, if they are, we do not hear anything about it."

"No; your mother talks of something more interesting, I should hope."

And while Violet looks her astonishment at this disrespectful speech, Bertie, good-natured if silly, says:

"Don't be cheeky, Amy. Miss Veweker is shocked at you, I can see."

Whereupon Violet blushes furiously, and for a time there is an uncomfortable silence.

Presently Bertie, who has hitherto been giving almost undivided attention to the good things before him, looks across at Violet, "Oh, I say, Miss Veweker," he remarks; "I want to know what you think about these Sugden people who are coming?"

"Who have come, you mean!" corrects Amy.

"Well, it's all one. What do you mean to do about your awistocwatic neighbours? We don't mean to acknowledge their existence, of course."

"It isn't 'of course' at all," says Amy, ever ready to find fault with her mother and brother. "But still, we shall not take any notice of them."

"It is most unfortunate that people of their class should have taken The Towers at all," says Mrs. Lawrence plaintively. "Still, we must not be ill-natured," with a sweet smile in Violet's

direction; "and I daresay they are worthy people enough in their way. Of course your mother will not call?"

Violet blushes painfully.

"I think Mother does intend calling by and by," she says with an effort; "but I do not suppose she will ever be on really friendly terms with them. I was a little surprised myself to hear that she thought of doing so," she continues. "I—I thought it was rather unnecessary; but I suppose" (and here Violet blushes again in her efforts to be loyal to her mother without doing violence to her own feelings) "that Mother knows best."

"Oh, of course! I am sure your mother would only do it from her usual kind feeling. I must ask my sister Louisa, Lady Bradley, you know, if she knows anything about them; and as to calling, I shall see what Lady Laura Lennox does."

"I can't think why you cannot act on your own responsibility, Mama!" says Amy impatiently. "You are always asking Aunt Louisa about people, or waiting to see what Lady Laura Lennox does."

"Well, my dear, one must do as others do."

"I shouldn't," replies Amy, pushing back her chair. "If I wanted to call on anyone, I should do it; and if I didn't want to, nobody would induce

me to; not even the Queen. Now Bertie, when you have quite finished, we will go into the drawing-room. Shall we, Mama?"

Mrs. Lawrence replies by rising from the table, and as Violet and Amy follow her, the latter says:

"Shall we go down to the river, Vi? If there is a breeze anywhere it is sure to be there. I vote we go and see. Mama will be only too glad to get rid of us for a little while!"

"Amy! how can you say such a thing? You will have Miss Vereker thinking us very inhospitable!"

"Oh, no, indeed, Mrs. Lawrence! My mother always likes to be quiet for a little while after luncheon. She generally rests on the sofa for half an hour."

"Ah, quite right! The cares of housekeeping are very arduous and exhausting, and when one is no longer young—" A little deprecating wave of Mrs. Lawrence's jewelled white hands completes the sentence, but Violet does not contradict her, as she is evidently meant to do.

In the hall the girls come across Bertie, who is roaming about, evidently not knowing what to do with himself.

On seeing them approaching, he hastily adjusts his eye-glass, which, however, immediately falls down again.

"Hallo!" he says. "Oh, dash the glass! where is it? Where are you going to take Miss Veweker to, eh, Amy?"

"We are going down to the river," replies the girl; "but we don't want you!"

"Oh, indeed!" And this time the boy succeeds in screwing the glass into his eye; but the effect is so ludicrous that Violet is tempted to laugh outright. "Well, you needn't alarm yourself," he continues, addressing himself to his sister. "I couldn't have come if you had wanted me. I'm going over to see Tom Bowles about those bull tewwier pups."

"Oh, are you? Do try and get one for me; there's a dear boy!"

"Not I. You should learn—dash it, there it goes again!—you should learn to be civil to a feller. It's no use your 'dear boy-ing' me now! You're too late in the field for once. I am going to see if I can get one for Miss Cinthy, though! She told me she wanted one. Will you tell her, please, Miss Veweker, that I am going to see what I can do?"

"Oh, yes; thanks! I'll be sure and tell her, Mr. Lawrence." And Violet runs down the steps after Amy, who has started off by herself.

"Ah, now!" says the elegant Bertie, screwing in his eye-glass and striking an attitude, "those Veweker girls know how to speak to a feller! Ahem! 'Mr. Lawrence!' I wonder what Miss Amy thought of that? Dashed if I believe she heard it at all, though; she was in such a pwecious huwwy to get off!"

CHAPTER IV.

A BOAT ADRIFT.

IN the meantime Amy and Violet walk slowly down to the river, a narrow stretch of which runs through the grounds of The Châlet just below the flower garden, continuing its course and widening somewhat through those of The Towers, and also of The Willows beyond. Having strolled for some little distance along the banks, they presently sit down to rest in a sequestered nook, which, besides having the advantage of being completely hidden by a sudden bend of the river, is a perfect bower of

wild flowers, in which great purple and yellow irises predominate. Hard by this flowery nook, the Lawrences' little boat is tied up, ready to hand for anyone who feels disposed for a turn on the river.

"Now, do tell me, Violet," says Amy presently, "are you going to this royal wedding or are you not?"

"I thought I had told you, Amy. It seems to me to be uncertain. Papa has been about a window, but there is some hitch. Are you going?"

"No; no such luck. I asked Papa the other day if he would not take a window, and to my astonishment he flew into a passion, and said Mama and I seemed to think he was made of money! I said no more, of course; but I did think it odd, and rather unkind, too, because there is no doubt at all that Papa is rich. But he has been very strange sometimes of late, and so morose and preoccupied, he quite annoys Mama."

"Perhaps he is worried with business," suggests Violet.

"Well, if he were a poor man, I should be inclined to think that myself, dear; but, as things are, I don't see how that could be. Look here, Vi,

supposing you and I go up to town together, and take our chance of seeing something."

Violet gasps.

"Good gracious, Amy! what would our respective parents say?"

"Well, nothing,—provided they knew nothing about it, of course." And Amy glances meaningly at her friend.

There is a little awkward pause, and Violet both looks and feels uncomfortable, for she by no means approves of this independent spirit of Amy's, though she is too much afraid of offending her to say so. So she ignores the latter part of the speech and rejoins lightly:

"Yes, what fun it would be, always supposing such a plan were possible. Well, I will let you know what Papa settles about the window. I wish Mother would ask you to join us, but we shall be rather a large party. We expect Iris and her husband on a visit in a day or two, you know."

"Oh, then, I suppose you will be awfully busy; going out, and entertaining, and all the rest of it. Look here, Vi, I am going to get into the boat. It will be much more shady there than here. That reflection from the other bank is almost as

bad as having the sun itself on one. You won't come, of course?"

And Amy gets up and moves towards the tree beneath which the boat is moored. She has not gone many steps, however, when she comes to a sudden standstill.

"Come here, Violet," she says, with lowered voice. "What should you say that object is lower down a good bit, on the opposite bank? No, you are not looking far enough; I mean right away past those willows."

Violet shades her eyes with her hand, and looks intently in the direction indicated.

"It looks like a man," she says.

"I am almost sure it *is* a man," replies Amy, with conviction.

"Well, even supposing it is, is there anything very extraordinary in the circumstance?"

"My dear Violet," exclaims the other, looking at her friend's calm face with a ruffled expression on her own, "don't you comprehend that if it is a man, that same man is trespassing! That is *our* ground!"

"Oh, yes, I see!" says Violet.

But she can hardly help smiling at this display of wounded dignity about such a trifle.

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E HERE, VIOLET; WHAT SHOULD YOU SAY THAT OBJECT IS ON THE OPPOSITE BANK?"

"Well, tell him to go," she suggests, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Oh, no, I couldn't! Now, I believe you are laughing at me!" the girl exclaims, as she turns round suddenly and catches sight of Violet's face. "But it is horrid, I think, to feel that one cannot be private in one's own grounds. Never mind; perhaps he won't see us, and if we pretend that we haven't seen him, we shall be quits. Now, here goes!" And, holding her skirts together with one hand, Amy steps lightly into the boat.

"Wait a minute, while I get these cushions arranged, then I'll talk to you from here. We can hear just as well if you sit on that clump under the tree. Look, I'm going to throw you this cushion!—catch!—that's it. And, oh! do, like a dear girl, go back for my sunshade. It's lying by that bunch of reeds."

Violet turns round immediately to carry out her friend's behest, but before she can reach the spot indicated, a piercing scream falls upon her startled ears.

"Violet! Violet! the boat is adrift! Oh, Violet, help me!"

Before the last words have left the girl's lips

Violet is down close by the edge of the bank again, standing with outstretched hands, as if to stay the progress of the little boat, as it drifts, slowly but surely, out into the middle of the stream.

"Oh, what can I do? what can I do?" cries Amy, wringing her hands. Then she suddenly kneels down in the bows, and, leaning over, makes wild snatches at the reeds and rushes as the boat glides by.

"Don't, oh, don't do that!" cries Violet distractedly. "You will overbalance the boat!" But here the tiny skiff meets with some obstruction, which causes it to bump about a little, until it is suddenly caught by an eddy and swung round, nearer to the bank again.

"Wait a minute, keep steady!" cries Violet. And, seizing her own sunshade from the grass, she grasps a branch of a tree, and leans over the water as far as she dare. One moment of intense suspense, and then, alas! the boat glides onwards about half a foot beyond the reach of the long handle which is extended by Violet's trembling hand. The desperate clutch which Amy makes at the sunshade in passing shoots the boat with greater impetus out into mid-stream again, while

Violet, in a frantic effort to lean yet a little further, is nearly precipitated into the water. This time the boat clears the object which barred its way before, and, finding a clear course before it, drifts steadily down with the tide at a pace which Violet would not have thought possible.

It is then that Violet remembers the weir by the mill, about a mile lower down, and, knowing full well that if the little skiff continues its course unchecked much longer, nothing can save her friend from a terrible death, she rushes wildly along the bank.

"The sculls, Amy, the sculls! Can't you use them?"

"They are not in the boat; there is nothing in the boat but a short rope," answers back the girl in a voice of despair. "Oh, Vi, Vi, am I to die like this? Will no one try to save me?" And the poor girl hides her face in her hands, and sinks down at the bottom of the boat, for she has given up all hope of being able to help herself."

At this moment Violet is startled by a loud "Hallo!" from the opposite bank, and to her intense joy she sees a tall, stalwart young fellow preparing to go to her friend's rescue, while a fine retriever stands close by, wagging his tail and

eagerly looking up into his master's face for instructions.

"Don't be frightened!" calls the stranger in a loud, clear voice. "Have you a rope? All right. Keep tight hold of one end and throw the other out. Now, Caesar! fetch the rope!" he cries in a commanding voice to the dog, who jumps and prances round him, eager for action. "Good dog! fetch it here."

With a mighty splash the noble animal commences his voyage, while Violet watches with breathless interest from the other shore.

"Point to the bank!" the stranger calls again to Amy. "That's right; bring it here! good dog! bring it here!"

And Violet sees the dog, with the rope in his mouth, turn himself round and swim slowly, steadily for the shore, with the boat and its occupant safely in tow.

In another moment the stranger is able to lean forward and take the rope from the dog's mouth, and then, with little difficulty, he hauls the boat in amongst the reeds and rushes; while Caesar, not a little proud of his own work, capers and prances round his owner, shaking himself furiously, and barking loudly for the praise which he feels

he has honestly won this time. At first Amy is almost too much overcome by her conflicting emotions to be able to speak. But presently, when she becomes calmer, she thanks him prettily enough for his timely aid and rescue, but with a certain diffidence which he puts down to natural shyness, but which in reality is born of the recollection of her uncharitable remarks of a short time since, relative to his daring to trespass on their (the Lawrences') grounds.

"And now, what are we to do about your sister?" inquires the stranger, who, manlike, cuts short Amy's thanks for his services.

"Oh, Violet—, my friend," she adds quickly, "will walk up to the bridge, and I can meet her there." And Amy, by a series of energetic signs, makes her wishes known to Violet, who stands on the opposite bank—looking intensely relieved, but a little uncertain what to do.

"If you will allow me, I will walk up to the bridge with you," remarks the stranger, while he busies himself in tying up the boat, *pro tem.* "Then I can recover my fishing-tackle going along."

Amy cannot do otherwise than bow her willingness to this suggestion. But to be compelled to

associate with a person who is as completely unknown to her as Adam himself hurts her dignity sorely, and she cannot help showing something of this, notwithstanding the great service he has just rendered her.

The walk to the bridge is rather a silent one, therefore, and Amy for one is immensely relieved to find Violet already at the rendezvous, waiting for them.

Violet, however, after having given her friend's hand an affectionate squeeze, turns at once to the gentleman (for such he certainly is) by her side.

"I don't know how we can thank you," she says simply, and with the tears standing in her eyes. "If it had not been for you, and this dear, brave, old dog, my friend would—would—" and the girl breaks off with a little hysterical sob.

"Don't speak of it, please," replies the young man, while Violet struggles for composure. "Besides, it is, as you say, my good dog here whom you have to thank, if anybody." And while Caesar acknowledges this compliment in his own way, his master falls to marvelling at the difference of the two faces before him, both fair in a measure, but the one haughty, cold, and apparently forgetful of the painful scene of only a few moments

ago; the other still tremulous and pale with emotion at the same recollection. "By the by," he continues, speaking lightly and quickly, "I have an idea that I have been trespassing this afternoon. I thought I was fishing in The Towers water, but I fancy I must have roamed some way beyond. Perhaps you can enlighten me as to the extent of my transgression?" and he looks at Violet.

But Amy, ever ready with an answer, is before her.

"Oh, as to that," she says, not too politely, "you have been trespassing wherever you have been on this part of the river. That part," pointing with her recovered sunshade, "runs through the grounds of The Willows; my friend's residence," with a little wave of her hand towards Violet. "Up a little higher, where we were sitting just now, is our part of the river, belonging to The Châlet, and The Towers water is between the two. As a matter of fact I believe you were fishing in that, and if so you were trespassing with a vengeance; for the new people, a rather queer set, I believe, who have taken the place, are already established there."

"Indeed?" And the corners of the young man's mouth twitch a little, as he turns round

and shades his eyes from the dazzling rays of the sun. "May I ask your definition of the expression 'a rather queer set'?" he continues.

Amy shrugs her shoulders.

"Well, they are nobodies! Indeed, almost worse than nobodies! some of these *nouveaux riches*, you know."

"Ah, yes! I understand," answers her companion with intense gravity. "People of no education whatever, I suppose. Goths in short, who leave out or put in h's *ad lib*, and eat with their knives, I've no doubt. Dear me! what a calamity for you young ladies! And, by Jove, they will be wedged in between you, so to speak. Of course you will not think of associating with them?"

"Oh, dear, no!" replies Amy decidedly.

"What is their name?" he asks her presently.

"Sugden," is the prompt reply. "The soap people, you know."

"Oh, really! how strange! I happen to know something about them myself; and I have heard that their balls and parties are the jolliest going. But as you say," with a shrug that quite eclipses Amy's, "they must be snobbish in the extreme. Just fancy—Sugden, the soap people!" And thrusting his hands into his trousers' pockets, the

young fellow laughs long and heartily. "By the way, that reminds me," he continues, pulling himself up with a sudden gravity, "it is time I was dressing for dinner. By Jove, yes! it is later than I thought, and my friends are dining early this evening. Good afternoon, ladies; may I say *auf wiederseh'n*?" And with a courtly bow to each of the girls in turn, the stranger, followed by Caesar, swings off in the direction of The Towers.

Both girls stand looking after him until he has disappeared from view; then with one accord they turn and look at one another.

"I never said they were 'snobbish'!" remarks Amy, with a growing conviction that her preserver has been secretly laughing at her.

"You implied it, though," says Violet, who has been feeling rather uncomfortable all through the interview. "I cannot think how you could go on talking like that to a stranger! I thought you were so particular. Another thing, I am half inclined to think that he really knows the Sugdens well. Perhaps he is staying with them!"

"Good gracious, Violet! You don't think so, really, do you?"

"I do," replies the girl emphatically. "Look,

he is jumping over the rail that divides this and The Towers ground! He has something to do with them, you see."

"Good gracious!" gasps Amy once more. "Perhaps he is a Sugden himself!"

"Very likely," remarks Violet, rather enjoying her friend's discomfiture. "It is a great pity you spoke so openly, Amy. I feel just as strongly on the subject as you do, but one is not obliged to say all that is in one's mind."

"Oh! as to that, dear, people have different ideas. I always like to say out everything that I think."

"Regardless of people's feelings!"

"Oh, I don't suppose his 'feelings' were hurt! even supposing him to be a Sugden. Besides, I only said what was true after all."

"One can say what is true without being rude, Amy; or, better still, keep silent. I can't think how you could go on like that, when he had just saved you from drowning, too!"

"Oh, that was the dog's doing, not his!" replies Amy lightly. "I dare say if it had rested with Mr. Sugden (we will call him so for the sake of argument, dear) I should now be lying at the bottom of the mill-pond in sundry small pieces!"

"Amy! how can you? Have you no feeling? Really, I think you are most ungrateful to this—this—"

"Knight-errant!" suggests Amy maliciously. "My dear, what a pity it was not you that he rescued instead of my worthless self! Now come along in to tea, and then you can sing this knight's praises as much as you like. Mama delights in that kind of thing; only don't let her know that he is a possible Sugden, for that would spoil the illusion!"

CHAPTER V.

ANOTHER FAMILY PARTY.

AS Marmaduke Sugden, for our knight-errant of the last chapter is none other, strolls up to the great front entrance of The Towers, with his fishing-rod over his shoulder, and his dog at his heels, a fair, delicate-looking girl runs down the steps to meet him.

"Oh, Duke! where have you been? Do you know that it only wants ten minutes to dinner, and Aunt Eliza will be in fits if you keep it waiting?"

"Aunt Eliza—"

But a soft little hand is clapped over his mouth. "Now, Duke, no disrespectful remarks concerning our respected Aunt Eliza, if you please!"

"Hands off, Nell!" cries the young fellow, struggling. "I assure you I was about to call down a blessing on the good old lady's head!"

"Oh, I dare say! And yet with all your impertinence to her, she is foolish enough to wish you and no other to drive her to the station this evening."

"Ye gods and little fishes! Not really, though, Nell?"

"Yes, really. So now do hurry up and dress; there's a dear fellow! You know how worried dear Mother will feel if you keep Aunt Eliza waiting. Why, Duke, how dirty you are! and Caesar is wringing wet! Have you both been in the river?"

"Well, Caesar has been in, and I have had a narrow escape of following him. We have been doing the rescue business together: boat adrift—fair maiden in distress (only there were two), handsome fellow to the rescue! ahem!"

"You refer to Caesar, I suppose?" inquires his sister crushingly.

"Oh, of course! Well now, if I am really to

drive my esteemed aunt to the station, I suppose I had better be getting into some other clothes, especially as you are rude enough to say that these are dirty! By Jove! there goes the gong. Is it the first or second, Nell?"

"It's for dinner, Duke. Oh, do be quick! we shall be half through it before you are down."

"All right. I won't be two seconds. Tell Mother not to wait." And throwing his fishing-tackle down in the hall, Duke bounds up the staircase, three steps at a time.

As the third course is carried into the dining-room, Duke follows on the heels of the servants, and sinking into the chair reserved for him, next to Aunt Eliza, throws a little apologetic glance down the table to his mother.

"How late you are, dear Duke!" says the latter, looking fondly at her son and rather nervously at her sister-in-law. "Your aunt is eating no dinner, she is so anxious lest she should lose her train."

"Why, my dear Eliza, Duke can bowl you over to the station in less than twenty minutes with his fast mare!" exclaims Mr. Sugden.

"I do not wish to be bowled anywhere by Duke's 'fast mare', John, thank you. I would far rather sit behind that steady little cob of yours,

my dear Duke. Now, John," turning again towards her brother, "I can see perfectly well that you are laughing at me. But I do not like frisky horses, and never shall, nor cows either! Now, Constance, if you will excuse me, I really think I had better go and say good-bye to my father, and then I can put on my bonnet."

And as Duke pushes back his aunt's chair for her he remarks, with almost preternatural gravity:

"If I were you, the next train I had to catch in the evening, Aunt, I would really dine overnight. Then, you see, you would have the whole day before you to get to the station—without 'a rush', I mean, of course."

To which sally Miss Sugden administers an admonishing tap of her fan upon her audacious nephew's arm.

Nell having insisted on going upstairs with her aunt instead of her mother, the latter resumes her seat, and is instantly attacked by her son on another matter, which has only just presented itself to his mind.

"My dear Mother," he remarks lazily, "wherefore are we partaking of this repast in the dining-room like ordinary mortals? I understood that we were to have a sort of scratch meal out on

the front steps or somewhere: whereas, here we are as usual, and with the exception of the carpet, which is conspicuous by its absence, everything seems to be in its proper place!"

Mrs. Sugden laughs.

"Well, I must say it did look rather like it, Duke, when the men declared they could do nothing more to-day, and walked themselves off! But the servants all turned to with such hearty goodwill that they very soon got this room into some semblance of order. The drawing-room is in a perfect uproar, of course, and so are all the other sitting-rooms; but I believe there will be some beds to sleep upon, for the maids are all busy upstairs now. Really, the servants have worked so well that we shall soon be quite in order, I expect."

Here Aunt Eliza and Nell re-enter the room, the former in secret trepidation as to certain sounds of pawing and general restlessness which have been wafted up to the bedroom window from outside.

Having handed his aunt into the somewhat elevated dog-cart, Duke seats himself beside her, and in a twinkling they are off at a tearing pace, which casts consternation into Aunt Eliza's soul.

"Does he kick, Duke?" she presently queries, in a voice which is tremulous with suppressed fear.

"What, the mare? Oh, no! That is, not now. She kicked in the splash-board the first time I took her out; that was a fortnight ago; but she had such a lesson on that occasion that I don't fancy she will try on that game again. Woa, there! steady, lass! Don't be alarmed, Aunt, it was only the shadow of your bonnet!"

Aunt Eliza turns, if possible, a shade paler than before, but she says nothing; only tightening her hold, with the energy of despair, of the rail on the one side, and (surreptitiously) the tail of Marmaduke's light overcoat on the other.

Presently she relinquishes the coat, and lays a nervous, trembling hand upon her nephew's arm.

"Duke, Duke, the down express is almost due, and the next quarter of a mile is parallel with the line!"

"Oh, that is all right!" replies Marmaduke cheerily. "Vixen can stand any amount of noise, and with her blinkers, which are rather extra close, you observe, she will not see the train till it is well past. She does not mind anything

passing her, but she is not fond of passing objects on the road herself. She is much more likely to shy at a blade of grass lying in the road! The other day we had quite a to-do about a cabbage leaf! I turned her round and trotted her up to it thirteen times before I conquered her fear; but she had to pass it, of course."

"Oh, yes; of course!" And Aunt Eliza looks up admiringly at the strong, resolute face above her, which, now that there is serious work on hand, is as grave and sober as any judge's.

They drive on silently for the next few minutes; then suddenly there is a far-off sound which rapidly becomes plainer, and Vixen pricks her ears and shakes her head. In a second the express comes tearing down from behind them, and with a screech and a rush is past and out of sight in a flash.

A smothered little gasping sigh makes Marmaduke look down at the little trembling figure beside him.

"Why, Aunt!" he exclaims kindly; "you were not really frightened, were you?"

"A little, Duke, a little!" replies the old lady in a weak voice. "I daresay it is very foolish of me, especially after what you said. But we can't

help our little weaknesses, can we, Duke? And when you come to be an old woman like myself, you may know perhaps what it is to be nervous."

Duke laughs.

"It will be some considerable time before I come to be an old woman, Aunt. Do you not think so?"

"Did I say 'old woman', Duke? How very stupid, to be sure! But really, I was so terrified at the way this dreadful horse of yours pricked his ears, that I wonder I am able to speak at all."

"Poor Aunt!" says the young fellow, smiling down upon her kindly, "I had no idea you would really be so nervous after what I said about Vixen. I wouldn't willingly have caused you any uneasiness for the world; but, though I'm afraid I was mean enough to keep the real state of affairs dark, I really could not help myself in the matter, for the other horses have not come down yet, and this mare was the only one in the place."

"Oh, well then, you couldn't help it, of course!" says the old lady, brightening up, "and I must say your mare behaved remarkably well in the matter of the express. I did think," she continues after a short pause, "that it was hardly like my

nephew Duke to put his old auntie to any unnecessary pain—because pain it is, Duke, to me, to sit behind frisky horses. Oh, dear me! here is a pony carriage coming along, and at such a pace! Oh, *does* she object to meeting things?"

"No, no, Aunt. Don't, please, worry yourself. She will pass this all right; you see if she doesn't."

As the smart pony carriage nears and passes the dog-cart, Marmaduke suddenly makes a spasmodic snatch at his cap; and directly they are well past his aunt turns to him inquiringly.

"What fashionable-looking young ladies, Duke; at least, one of them; the other has a nice face, and looks lady-like. Who are they?"

"I really don't know, Aunt. Yes, you are right; the one has a very nice face, though she is not what you would call pretty."

"A fig for so-called prettiness!" says the old lady testily. "What character do you ever find with those 'pretty' dolls' faces? I would rather see a downright plain face, so long as it was intellectual looking. But what do you mean, Duke, by saying you don't who those girls are? You bowed to them!"

"Yes, that is the absurd part of it; for although I have actually spoken to them, and even know

the names of their respective dwellings, I am quite in the dark as to their own names."

Then Duke gives his aunt a brief account of the afternoon's doings, which amuses that lady not a little.

"I believe you have been having a fine flirtation with those charming young ladies!" she says, looking archly into her nephew's face. "It is all very well to pretend that you know nothing about them, and care less; but I know better! Ah, here we are at the station at last. Thank goodness for that!" and as Duke signs to a porter to come and hold Vixen's head, poor Aunt Eliza breathes a deep sigh of thankfulness.

An hour or so later, when Duke is enjoying a meditative cigar, under some of the fine old trees with which The Towers grounds abound, Nellie, with Caesar in her wake, crosses the lawn and joins him.

"Well, Duke," she says, sitting down beside him, "wherefore so grave and thoughtful?"

Her brother does not answer for a few seconds; but presently he blows a cloud of smoke up into the air, and turning towards her quickly:

"Has it ever struck you, Nell," he asks, "that we are 'rather a queer set'?"

M 299

"HAS IT EVER STRUCK YOU, NELL, THAT WE ARE 'RATHER A QUEER SET'?"

His sister stares at him in silent amazement for a minute. Evidently she thinks her brother has taken temporary leave of his senses.

"What in the world are you talking about, Duke?" she asks, after a prolonged stare.

"Well, that is what I have been told this afternoon! That the people who have come to The Towers are 'a queer set', almost 'worse than nobodies'—some of these *nouveaux riches*; in short, we are 'Sugdens, the soap people', Nell!"

"Good gracious, Duke! who ever has been so rude as to talk like that of anyone?"

"Well, my young friends of this afternoon. But I am bound to admit that they did not know that it was actually one of the despised 'soap people' that they were making these confidences to. Amusing, is it not?"

"Amusing?" echoes Nell indignantly. "I call it shamefully rude! Who and what can they be to make such insulting remarks even about the poorest or lowest?"

"Stay a minute, Nell, I must not be unjust: I have just remembered that it was only one of the girls who made these sweeping assertions! The other was silent, and though she looks a proud little puss enough, I don't fancy she admired the

freedom with which her friend talked. Ah! I remember now: she belongs to the 'Willows' people, next door!"

"Oh! then, she is one of the Vereker girls; and some one told me—I forget who now—that they are one of the nicest families down here, and that we should be sure to like them. Don't you remember, Duke; one of the girls, the eldest I think, married Charley Fairfax not long ago? Well, I don't care! I shall never like this sister of hers, never!"

"Oh, nonsense, Nell! she's a nice little girl enough."

But here a clear, musical voice is heard calling from the front steps:

"Nell, Nell; come in, my love: you will catch cold out there in your thin dress!"

CHAPTER VI.

VIOLET MAKES UP HER MIND.

ONE morning, about a week later, Cinthy, attired in her "working apron", and with face and hands adorned with little daubs of white, puts her head round the door of the morning room,

where Violet is engaged in touching up a rather doubtful sketch of The Towers park,—sketched, it is needless to say, before the arrival of the present tenants.

"Violet, Mother wants you. She is in the summer-house."

Then, advancing further into the room, she looks over her sister's shoulder.

"Good gracious! What are those creatures in the distance intended for? They must be some antediluvian animals! I have never seen any like them. Do you mean them for horses or sheep, Vi?"

"Cinthy! They are deer, of course. Don't you see their horns?"

"Oh, yes, of course! I should have said cows or sheep."

Violet gathers her drawing materials together.

"Did you say Mother was in the summer-house?" she inquires loftily.

"Yes, I did," replies Cinthy, still gazing at the mysterious-looking quadrupeds. "Now don't be waxy, Violet. Nobody in their senses would call you a tip-top artist yet, you know, any more than they would call me a masterly sculptor! But how in the world can anyone reach perfection

without making heaps upon heaps of mistakes to be corrected? There's a moral lecture for you! Well, I am off. I'm trying my hand at a bust of the Prince Consort, and if it turns out a really true likeness—as I positively believe it will, I shall send it to the Queen. I have quite given up Papa as hopeless; his nose is so tiresome!"

Violet finds her mother busying herself with the week's housekeeping accounts, an array of little bills and books arranged in neat order on the rustic table before her.

"It was still so hot, Violet," she remarks without looking up, "that I thought I must bring my accounts out here. I only wanted to tell you that I am going to make a round of calls this afternoon. I thought perhaps you would like to go with me. I have to return Mrs. Lawrence's last call for one."

"Oh, yes, I should like to go, Mother!" Then suddenly a wave of colour passes over the girl's rather pale face. "Are you—that is, have you many calls to make?" asks Violet hesitatingly.

"Oh, no! not many. It is too hot to be out very long, and of course we must be back in time to receive Iris and Charley. No, I think I shall confine myself to the immediate neighbourhood,

and only go to the Lawrences', the Horsemans', and the Stewarts', taking The Towers on our way back."

"The Towers!" echoes Violet, with a slight gasp.

"Yes," replies Mrs. Vereker, now intent on her knitting, and therefore not noticing her daughter's changed manner. "I must go there even if I leave one of the others, for I have left it over longer than I intended, and I don't know what Mrs. Sugden will think of me."

"It surely cannot very much matter what they think, Mother," remarks Violet, tossing her chin. Then after a short pause, she adds: "I think, perhaps, I would rather not go after all: that is, if you do not very much want me. If you do, I will go, of course; only then, if you do not mind, I will wait in the carriage while you go in to The Towers.

Mrs. Vereker lays down her knitting and looks straight into her daughter's face.

"You will do nothing of the kind, Violet. You can please yourself as to whether you go out with me or not, but if you do go, you will accompany me to the Sugdens."

Violet looks up in some astonishment at this unusual severity on her mother's part.

"Very well, Mother. I can say what I wish to Amy another time, I daresay." Then after a moment's pause she glances up quickly, a slight flush on her face. "You must not think me obstinate in this matter of visiting the Sugdens, Mother. I—"

"But I do, Violet," interrupts Mrs. Vereker with some impatience. "I think you are obstinate in the extreme! Moreover you have such a superabundance of what you call pride, that you cannot but have a very humiliating fall, sooner or later. However, let me hear your views on this much-contested point."

"I don't know about views, Mother, but I certainly do not think it right to lower oneself by associating with people who are beneath us in station; and although, of course, I shall be perfectly polite to the Sugdens if you ask them here" (this concession being made with a slight shrug), "I have said that I will not visit them, and having said that, nothing will induce me to enter their house!"

"Oh, then, it is a feeling of obstinacy after all, Violet!" and there is a suspicion of a smile on Mrs. Vereker's lips.

"You may call it obstinacy, Mother, but I

think I am only showing a proper amount of self-respect and individuality."

Mrs. Vereker smiles. "Well," she says, "you have taken your choice, and if afterwards you come to regret it, you will have only yourself to thank. You must also be content to see Cinthy taking your place."

"Cinthy can do as she pleases," remarks Violet, with another toss of her chin, "but I have quite decided never to enter their doors, unless I am carried in by force!—and that is hardly likely to happen, I suppose?"

"Hallo!" cries a voice behind her, which makes Violet jump, "who is going to be carried away by force, and by whom?"

"It is only Violet talking some of her nonsense," answers her mother for her. "We have been talking over that inexhaustible subject—the Sugdens. However, Violet and I have settled it together, so we will let the matter rest now. She must take the consequences of her obstinacy and foolishness, and I have no doubt she will wish before long she had taken my advice!"

"I am sure I shall not in that respect," replies the girl huffily; "and I told you it was not obstinacy, Mother: it is proper self-respect!" and

with a slight quaver in her voice over these last words, Violet turns and walks away.

It is with difficulty that Mrs. Vereker prevents her husband laughing outright at this last announcement.

"Don't laugh at the child, Robert," she says, scarcely able to repress her own laughter. "One cannot help being amused at all these high-flown speeches; but her 'feeling', as she calls it, about this affair is very real to her, poor child!"

"Well, well, my dear, she will grow wiser as she grows older, you will see. The best way, I think, is to take as little notice of all this nonsense as possible. Violet's heart is in the right place, of that I feel sure; and if she is a little wrong-headed on some points, why, so were we all at one time or another, I suppose."

"Yes, of course, Robert. Still, it is a pity; and she spoils so many kind actions by this silly vanity and false pride. Now, Cinthy is so different; and although she makes it no special rule to visit the poor continually as Violet does, her visits are looked for and appreciated far, far more."

"Yes, yes, that is quite true. I know they are from what I hear myself. Well, now, let us go

in to luncheon, or I shall lose my train, and I don't want to be later home than I can help, on account of Iris and Charley."

CHAPTER VII.

SIR CHARLES AND LADY FAIRFAX.

VIOLET! Violet! where are you? I want you."

The voice is Cinthy's, and that young lady stands on the front steps, swinging her hat in her hand, and casting comprehensive glances around. But there is no answer, and presently a maid, passing through the hall, says:

"I think Miss Violet is in the orchard, Miss Cinthy. I heard her say she was going there."

"Oh! thank you, Alice." And Cinthy slowly goes down the steps and walks away in the direction indicated.

Apparently she knows where she will find her sister, for, without ever so much as looking up, she makes straight for a gnarled and twisted old apple-tree, the bent branches of which afford a capital resting-place.

"Oh, you are there!" remarks Cinthy, coming to a standstill under the tree, and looking up for the first time.

"Yes, I am here," replies Violet, without taking her eyes off her book. "What then?"

"Well, I want to talk to you. The question is, am I coming up, or are you coming down?"

"You had better come up, I should think; but you can't come on my branch. I heard an ominous cracking just now, and it certainly wouldn't bear your weight."

So Cinthy seats herself on a lower bough.

"Well, I want to tell you about our afternoon. We called on the Sugdens, and I like them awfully, especially Mabel. She is so fond of animals, and was just going to take me to the paddock to see her own particular pony, when Mother got up to go. She—Mabel, I mean—promised to show me the home farm next time we go."

"You don't surely call her Mabel?"

"Yes, of course! Why not? it's her name."

Violet merely elevates her chin in reply, and Cinthy goes on.

"Yes; I call Mabel right down jolly. I am sure she and I will get on well together. Nellie, Miss Sugden, you know, is nice too; but she is

quieter. Of course she is older. Now, I think you and she would get on nicely, very likely."

"Cinthy!"

"What's the matter, Vi? Has anything stung you? Now, what was I going to say? Oh, I know! Mabel was asking all about you, Vi. She says she should like to see your greenhouses and hospital, and all the rest of it. She says you must be awfully clever, and that she is looking forward to making your acquaintance. I was just telling her about your drawing when Lady Laura Lennox was announced, and there was a general post, so to speak. The son, Marmaduke, your friend, Vi, came and talked to me then. He asked if you were any the worse for your fright of the other afternoon? or rather, that he hoped you were not," adds Cinthy, feeling perhaps that her first way of putting it almost implied a hope that such might be the case.

"I am sure he is very kind," says Violet, struggling between her wish to appear dignified, and a natural pleasure at being remembered. "But you need not call him 'my friend', Cinthy."

"Why not? He isn't your enemy, I suppose? Ah, there goes the dressing gong! Mother said she would have it sounded earlier, so that we

might be ready when Iris arrives. Come, Violet."

About half an hour later the whole family are waiting about on the steps and in the hall, ready to receive Sir Charles and Lady Fairfax.

And soon the quick trot of horses is heard, and then the carriage sweeps round the drive and up to the steps, where stands the delighted father, ready to open the door. A quick embrace, then Iris, tall, fair and graceful as her namesake, is folded in her mother's arms, her husband in the meantime greeting his father-in-law and sisters-in-law with almost boyish enthusiasm.

"Why, my dear Violet," and Lady Fairfax surveys her younger sister critically, "what a grown-up air you have now! Since when have you turned up your hair?"

Violet flushes up, and scarcely knows whether to laugh or be angry. The first feeling prevails, however, and she answers laughingly:

"Why, where is your memory, Iris? It was turned up long before you left home!"

"By Jove, yes, so it was!" chimes in Charley Fairfax, coming forward with a broken parasol in his hand. "I remember when I last came to stay here, in my bachelor days, being awfully dis-

appointed because I could not pull it any longer. I had to console myself with Cinthy's. I say, Iris, I'm awfully sorry, but this thing broke right in two as I took it up! I suppose I have been sitting on it. Will it mend, do you think?" And Charley looks quite subdued and penitent as he tries, vainly, to fit the two pieces together.

"Mend? pooh! you had better buy me another, Charley. His one idea," continues the young wife laughingly, turning to her mother and father, "since he was launched into the cares of a household is 'will it mend?' From that lovely point lace on my wedding-dress, Mother, which he was kind enough to tear the first evening we dined out in Paris, down to my maid's bedroom candlestick, which he accidentally knocked out of her hand one night, it is 'will it mend?' And I am sorry to say he showed far more contrition over the latter article than he did over the great rent in my lace! I suppose it was because it made more noise."

"Yes; that was it!" cries the accused delightedly. "The noise was simply excruciating. Don't you remember, Iris, how it flew over the bannisters and bounded down the stairs? And I thought it would never stop falling. Oh, it was dreadful!"

Later on in the evening a merry group of people of all ages may be seen scattered about in the garden, all gravitating more or less, however, towards the rustic table, behind which Violet sits, administering to the general wants.

Mrs. Vereker and her eldest daughter sit hand in hand, their wicker chairs drawn up close together, and while Mr. Vereker strolls up and down under the trees, in earnest conversation with a privileged friend, who has dropped in for an after-dinner cigar, Cinthy and Geoff are engaged in teasing their brother-in-law, in his new character as a married man, if it is possible to tease anyone so perfectly good-natured as Charley Fairfax. At the present moment he is giving a graphic, though lazy, description of his and Iris's wedding tour, from which they have only recently returned; and Cinthy, who is wild to travel on her own account, sits beside the low wicker lounge on which the young fellow is stretched luxuriously, drinking in all the information with the rapt attention which she generally gives to any subject which interests her, while for her brother-in-law's benefit she wields an immense fan in rather an absent-minded manner.

"Thanks, Cinthy, my dear," says Charley pre-

sently, raising himself on one elbow, and stretching out his hand for his coffee-cup which is on the grass beside him. "The close and undivided attention which you give to my poor words is flattering in the extreme; but if you could kindly work that machine with a little more regularity I should be deeply grateful! I assure you I have been suffering tortures the last five minutes, from the awful uncertainty as to whether it would or would not clear my nose in its next descent. It —the thing you are holding, I mean—has been gradually getting lower the whole time I was describing Venice to you, and knowing that the next downward swish would probably be fatal, I was forced to speak. I am sure you will pardon me? —oh, no, no! there is not the slightest occasion to stop. There—yes, that will do very nicely indeed, thank you," and he sinks back again, exhausted with the effort of drinking his coffee. So Cinthy resumes her operation of fanning, while Geoff sits on the grass at her feet, busy over some fishing-tackle that requires looking to, and Charley takes up the thread of his narrative once more.

Presently, however, he sits up, his attention being arrested by his wife's last remark.

"What are you talking about, Iris?" he de-

mands; "and who are these people that you and the mother are discussing with such zest?"

"They are the people who have taken The Towers," replies Lady Fairfax briefly. "Their name is Sugden; and Mother has been calling on them this afternoon."

"Sugden,—Sugden," repeats the young fellow, knitting his brows. "Are they the Sugdens of Falcourt, Worcester? the people who made such a fortune out of soap, I mean;—because if so they are some of the most delightful people going—or coming either, for the matter of that. Why, Jimmy Sugden and I were chums at Balliol together, and a rattling good fellow he is, I can tell you; and so is Duke. Jove! to think that Jimmy is only a stone's-throw off, and that I haven't seen him yet? . . . Great Scott! whom have we here? and what is the excitement?"

This last exclamation is called forth by the sudden and unexpected appearance of a somewhat ludicrous figure, which is apparently being pulled into sight on the carriage-drive with some considerable unwillingness. All other eyes are instantly, of course, bent in the same direction as Charley's, and what they see is a couple of powerful bull-terrier pups at one end of a long leash,

and a panting, dishevelled youth at the other. At the same moment that this unfortunate individual becomes aware that he is seen, an awful thing happens, caused by a sudden rush of one of the pups round the stem of a tree, and while the other, indignant at his wishes as to the route not being consulted, twists round violently in the opposite direction, the unhappy youth becomes helplessly entangled in the leash, and is thrown down on to his knees in a truly undignified manner.

"Hush!" says Cinthy, raising a warning hand, "it is Bertie Lawrence, and I suppose those are the dogs he was to bring me—at least, one of them; oh, don't laugh, Charley!"

"My dear Cinthy, I assure you nothing is further from my thoughts; I am even now going to the rescue. Come on, Geoff! I suppose you know this hero?"

Then Charley, as grave as any judge, makes his way to the tree, where Bertie and the two dogs are still engaged in trying to disentangle themselves, the latter with loud yelps of indignation.

"Perhaps I can be of some use with those tiresome brutes?" he asks, with simple courtesy. And considerately turning his back upon Bertie, who

is struggling to his feet, he administers a light kick to each of the pups, which, together with a stentorian "Lie down!" instantly reduces them to order. Then he stoops and unwinds the leash from the tree, while Bertie tries to shake the dust off his matchless evening suit, over which is flung a light overcoat.

"Thanks, awfully!" he says, looking up into Charley's frank, good-natured face. "They are powerful bwutes, vewy. But you seem to be able to contwol them easily enough. I had no idea they were so old, or I should not have bwought them: at anyrate both. Oh, here comes Miss Cinthy! Oh, dash it, where is my glass! Yes, these are the pups, Miss Veweker: which do you think you pwefer? They are—dash it, there it goes again!—they are both ugly enough, but I believe they are well-bwed dogs, and as you had a fancy for a bull-tewior—"

"Oh, yes!" cries Cinthy, apparently delighted with the already well-developed ugliness of her future property. "I wanted a regular out-and-out bull-terrier. I should have liked a real bull-dog, but Mother dislikes them so. Thank you so much, Mr. Lawrence, for bringing them. You will come and speak to Mother and my sisters, will

you not? And you must have some coffee or tea after your walk; especially as I am afraid the dogs have been rather troublesome."

"Well, yes, they have," admits Bertie, rather glad of some sympathy; "dashed twoublesome, one might say. But look here, Miss Veweker, what am I to do with these dogs if I accept your invitation? If I take them on the lawn with me they will tear the ladies' dwesses to shweds!"

"Well, look here, Cinthy," puts in Charley Fairfax, who still holds the leash to which both dogs are fastened; "why not choose your dog now, and have him taken straight to the stable? I'll undertake to manage the other; that is, if Mr. Lawrence will allow me?"

"Oh, of course! thanks awfully, I'm sure. I wish the dogs were at Halifax for my part. Not but what I am delighted that you are pleased with the pup, Miss Cinth—ah—h—Miss Veweker, I mean!" And blushing up to the roots of his sandy hair, the embarrassed youth follows the object of his secret adoration on to the lawn.

The important matter of Cinthy's choice having been duly discussed and decided, the favoured pup is led off to the stables by Mr. Vereker, and there installed in a comfortable kennel, from the

recesses of which he hurls defiance at his canine neighbours in a series of sharp, yelping barks, which bring forth deep bays of indignation from the older and more sober-minded inhabitants of the stable. In the meantime young Lawrence sits on the extreme edge of one of the garden chairs, evidently very ill at ease, and making short spasmodic replies, as he struggles vainly with the refractory eye-glass, to all remarks addressed to him.

"Are you fond of sports?" at length queries young Fairfax in desperation; and standing up with the evident intention of proposing a move.

"Well, not vewy," replies Bertie, also standing up, and wondering whether the remaining pup will seek to trip him up if he ventures to cross over to the table with his empty cup. "You see most sports give such a lot of twouble—except fishing. One can take it easy over fishing, don't you know; but I can't say I see the use of tiwing oneself out over all those violent games as some fellers do. I don't mind taking a scull sometimes, if the tide is with me, and I rather like being umpire in a cwicket or football match; but you don't catch me playing. I have too much wespect for my bones."

At this moment Mr. Vereker reappears; an open telegram in his hand.

"Did you ever know anything so annoying!" he exclaims, throwing the paper into his wife's lap. "That man Carter has wired to say we cannot have the window after all. I called in to-day and thought the matter was quite settled, and now he throws me over!"

The three younger members of the family groan audibly, while Iris asks, in her usual placid manner:

"But I suppose you can get another, Father?"

"Impossible, my dear. They will all have been snapped up long ago. Why, the wedding is the day after to-morrow. No, girls; I am afraid you will have to make up your minds to staying at home and reading the accounts of all the grand doings the next day."

"Well, it is most horribly disappointing. I have been looking forward to it for weeks!" And Violet petulantly decapitates a daisy with the point of her shoe.

"Well, well, my dear; it is no use being cross over it. I dare say Cinthy and Geoff are just as disappointed as you are!"

"Oh, more, infinitely more!" sighs the lat-

ter dramatically. "Are your people going, Bert?"

But during the diversion young Lawrence has plucked up courage to make his adieux to the ladies, and having got through this trying ordeal fairly creditably, he is not to be drawn into fresh conversation which might mean another ten minutes on the Vereker's lawn. So having deposited his coffee cup on the seat behind Cinthy, at the imminent risk of that young lady's sitting down upon it, he takes his departure, accompanied by Mr. Vereker and Charley—the latter still in possession of the rejected pup,—who have proposed to walk a little way down the road with him.

Having parted from young Lawrence, Mr. Vereker and Charley wend their way homeward, when, turning round a sharp corner, they come suddenly upon Mr. Sugden, who is walking from the opposite direction. A cordial greeting on Mr. Vereker's part, and a most enthusiastic one on Charley's are the result of the collision, and Mr. Sugden, at once deciding to retrace his steps for the sake of a few minutes' chat, turns round and walks back slowly with his two companions. Presently Mr. Vereker speaks of the disappoint-

ment he has just had about the window for the royal procession, and Mr. Sugden is full of indignation at the scant ceremony with which the other has been treated.

"What do you propose to do?" he asks.

"Well, I do not see that there is anything to be done. I should not care for myself, and I daresay my wife would survive the disappointment also, but, of course, it is a terrible blow to the young folks."

"Yes, yes; of course," replies Mr. Sugden musingly. Then a sudden idea seems to strike him. "Now, look here, Mr. Vereker; will you and Mrs. Vereker do me the favour of accepting seats in our window? Nothing, I am sure, would give my wife greater pleasure, and we must not let the young people be disappointed if we can help it."

"I am sure it is most kind and thoughtful of you to have proposed it, Mr. Sugden," replies Mr. Vereker heartily, "and my wife will be as pleased as I am to accept your invitation. As for my girls, they shall speak for themselves! I presume this fellow is included in the invitation, sir?" and Mr. Vereker playfully slaps Charley Fairfax's shoulder.

"Oh, of course, of course! He and my son James are sworn friends, you know. Of course you will bring Lady Fairfax," concludes Mr. Sugden, turning to Charley.

And so it is settled; and a few minutes later Mr. Vereker is standing on the lawn once more, the centre of an excited little group, consisting of Iris, Charley, Cinthy, and Geoff. Only Violet sits in the background, silent and disappointed still. For of what use is this news,—which has brought such radiant smiles back to the faces of the others,—to her?

Unconsciously she heaves a tremendous sigh, and as the vision of a handsome face, with earnest gray eyes, rises before her, she seems to hear over again the words, "*auf wiederseh'n*", just as they were spoken on that memorable afternoon, and which, though perfectly meaningless to her then, she now only too well understands.

"I suppose I shall have to meet him again!" she says to herself miserably. "But, oh! what torture it will be to feel that even in the most ordinary conversation he will be thinking to himself, 'this is the girl who thinks of me as one of the Sugdens, the soap people—nobodies!' Oh, how I wish all those words could be taken back;

for, although it was Amy who actually said them, I stood by and allowed them to be said, and that is almost, if not quite, as bad as saying them myself! And now Mother thinks it is only for the one reason I will not enter their house! Ah! she little knows; and I would rather die than let anyone know my chief reason. Oh, when I think of it all, I could almost hate Amy!"

With which pleasing reflections Violet slowly makes her way back to the house, and goes to bed.

CHAPTER VIII.

A GLIMMER OF LIGHT!

"MOTHER, what is the matter with Violet?" Lady Fairfax, pen in hand, suddenly turns round from the table where she sits writing letters, to ask this question. "Her manner is so strange; particularly on this vexed subject of visiting the Sugdens. What on earth makes her such a little goose? I am sure they are nice enough, and they are acknowledged by everyone. No; I firmly believe there is something else behind all this nonsense. She seems to positively shrink from

meeting these people, and the eldest son—Marmaduke, isn't it?—especially."

Then Mrs. Vereker tells her daughter of the conversation in the summer-house the previous morning, and of all Violet had said as to her intentions in the matter.

Lady Fairfax shrugs her shoulders.

"Well, she is an odd girl. But mark my words, Mother, there is something else behind all this, and all the nonsense about 'caste' is partly a blind! I am sure of it." At this moment the door is opened, and Mrs. Sugden is announced.

"Please pardon this early call, Mrs. Vereker," she says, coming forward into the room with her usual quiet grace, "but my husband has told me of your difficulty about a window for Thursday, and that he has begged you to join our party; and I have come to tell you how pleased and delighted we shall all be if you will do so. I hope you have decided to come."

"Indeed, yes; and we are only too grateful for your kindness in having made the proposal."

Then, after a few arrangements have been discussed and settled, the three ladies fall to talking of other matters, until Mrs. Sugden, glancing at the clock, rises to take her leave. At this moment

Violet suddenly opens the door, and as suddenly shuts it again on seeing the visitor.

But Mrs. Vereker is too quick for her, and to Iris's secret delight, calls her back.

"Violet, come here, I want you!" Then as the girl reluctantly returns to the room, Mrs. Sugden, as she greets her kindly, turns to the mother.

"This is your youngest daughter, I suppose?"

"No," replies Mrs. Vereker, "Violet is my second daughter. Cinthy, whom you have already seen, is my youngest girl." And she throws a little meaning glance at Violet, as though to say, "I told you I should make no excuses for you!"

"Ah! then you are the Miss Vereker of whom my son, Duke, has spoken to me. What a merciful thing it was that he happened to be near at hand that afternoon! I hope your friend was none the worse for her fright?"

"Oh, no, thank you!" replies Violet frigidly. "In fact, the danger was so quickly over—thanks to Mr. Sugden's clever dog—that it seems scarcely worth mentioning."

This last remark is for the benefit of her mother and sister, who are both looking somewhat bewildered.

"Yes; Caesar is a noble fellow," says Mrs. Sugden, quietly ignoring the implied slight to her son. "But," turning with a smile to Mrs. Vereker and Lady Fairfax, "I think if I had been in danger of drowning, whether the rescue were a quick one or not, I should certainly have considered it worth mentioning; should not you?"

As Mrs. Vereker and Iris accompany their visitor into the hall, *sans cérémonie*, Violet makes her escape, only to be pursued and brought back again, however, by Lady Fairfax, who, in passing back to the drawing-room, has said hastily to her mother:

"I told you so! Either she or her friend Amy has been rude to Mr. Sugden. Her very manner tells it."

So the girl is installed by her sister in a chair opposite the sofa on which their mother is seated, and commanded then and there to give an account of the proceedings of the afternoon alluded to, and to explain the reason of her extraordinary (as Lady Fairfax calls it) reticence on the subject.

"Well," exclaims her ladyship, while Violet is engaged in drying the tears which she has been quietly shedding during her mother's kind, and Iris's rather strong, lecture, "of all the extra-

ordinary girls! And upon my word, I can't see what there is to cry about!"

But Violet, who has carefully withheld all Amy's ill-bred remarks to her preserver, thinks differently; and much to her elder sister's annoyance, she still sits silently wiping away the tears which will come when she thinks of what she calls to herself, the "hardness and awkwardness of her position".

But when, presently, Mrs. Vereker and Violet are left alone, the former, by dint of much strategy and diplomacy, at length manages to draw the remainder of the story from her daughter. Mrs. Vereker is not altogether surprised at the nature of the confidences, which, now that the ice is once broken, Violet is only too glad to pour into her sympathetic ears. But, though she is more vexed at the whole matter than she cares to let the girl see, she hastens to make the best of the situation to Violet herself; for, having that true insight into her daughters' characters, which it would be well if all mothers possessed, she can see and thoroughly understand the struggle which is going on in the girl's mind between her so-called feeling of pride and her fine sense of justice. For Violet is as severely honest about matters concerning

herself as she is with others; and she cannot help seeing that in her ignorant condemnation of these people whom she was professing to despise, she, a lady by birth and education, has lowered herself, irremediably perhaps, in the eyes of the very people whom she had looked upon as being so completely beneath her; an idea which, with Violet's superabundance of vanity, is perfectly intolerable to her.

"You won't let Iris know anything about this, will you, Mother? I would rather that no one else besides yourself knew. I told Cinthy a little in confidence, but—certainly not Iris. And, Mother, do not be angry with me, but I cannot go with you to-morrow! Perhaps after they—the Sugdens, I mean—have been here, and received hospitality from you, I may feel a little better about it all. But I couldn't bear to visit them first, and I would rather, far rather, keep to what I have said in any case."

"But this is not a question of 'visiting', Violet."

"It is the same thing, Mother. You and the others will be their guests for the day. Please let me do as I wish, in this instance at any rate."

And Mrs. Vereker, understanding her daughter's feeling perhaps, gives way with a sigh.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY.

THE morning of the royal wedding dawns cloudless and brilliant as ever, and it is a very merry party that sits down to breakfast at The Willows; everyone being more or less in high spirits at the prospect of the fun before them.

It had been settled the previous day that Violet should go over to The Châlet during the absence of the others up in town; Mrs. Lawrence having suggested that her daughter should drive over early in the morning and fetch her.

"And so Violet really means to keep it up and stay away from this rare show of royalty which we are all childish enough to want to see," remarks Charley Fairfax presently. "But, doubtless, she prefers spending her day in the society of such a modern Hercules as our young friend of the other evening. What time does Hercules' sister come for you, Violet?"

"Oh, I shall not be going until long after you have all left. I think Amy said she would be here about eleven."

But even as she speaks a pony carriage turns in at the gate, and is driven briskly up to the door; where Richard, on the alert, receives an urgent message for Violet.

After an absence of only a few seconds, Violet comes running quickly back into the dining-room.

"Mother, would you mind me going now, at once, with Amy? She says she has made some nice plan for the day; a picnic or something, and wants me earlier."

"Oh, yes, certainly!" replies Mrs. Vereker at once; "and I hope you will enjoy your picnic, Violet. Take care of yourselves; and do not be too late in coming home."

So in less time than it takes to tell, Violet finds herself seated beside her friend, bowling along the smooth road at such a rapid rate that she is filled with wonder at the same.

"What are you in such a hurry for?" she presently demands.

"To catch the next up-train!" replies Amy briefly. "Come, get on, Firefly!" and the reins are pulled and jerked in a manner which causes the pony to toss up his head with indignation.

"My dear child," says Amy, in a patronizing

tone, which Violet secretly resents, "we are not going to a picnic at all! You and I and Bertie, whom we are to pick up at the cross-roads, are going up to town like any other reasonable beings, to see the royal wedding!—that is, the procession thereof."

"Amy!" gasps Violet, her face paling at this statement, made with perfect *sang froid* by her self-possessed companion.

"Well, why not?" inquires Amy, whose attention is just then being given to the turning of a sharp corner with as little sweep as possible. "There!" she cries, when, with a slight lurch of the carriage, they find themselves round the curve, tearing on at the same mad pace as before. "I call that a neat shave, though we *were* nearly in the ditch."

"But, Amy!" gasps Violet once more, and this time she lays a detaining hand on the other's arm. "You don't mean it! You can't surely mean it! And even if you did, how could we go?"

"Can't mean it?" echoes Amy rather crossly. "I can assure you, I can and do mean it! As to how we can go, I have managed all that. You don't think I should make half plans, do you? And don't," she adds suddenly, "catch hold of

my arm again like that, Violet, please! Firefly might shy, and then there might be an accident. Why, Violet! don't you want to go? You are never going to show the white feather, after all the trouble I have taken to arrange everything?"

This last thrust is more than Violet's dignity will stand, and drawing herself up, she says:

"I thought you knew me better than to accuse me of cowardice in anything, Amy!"

"Oh, well! I didn't mean it, of course; and it's too late now to go back in anything! Of course, to my people and yours we are going to a picnic, and we are at the present moment driving leisurely to Hawley Woods, to escape the heat of the day, you know! I shall tip a porter to put the pony and trap up at the Railway Inn."

And Amy laughs, though not very comfortably.

"My goodness!" she continues, looking hastily at her watch; "we shall lose the train now, if we don't take care! Oh, here is Bertie! Jump in, Bert, quick!" Then she whips up the pony, and off they start again, at a wilder pace than ever.

In the innermost recesses of her heart Violet devoutly wishes that they might lose the train, but owing to the "specials", which have been put on almost every line on this eventful day,

theirs, which is overdue by five minutes when they reach the station, is not even yet signalled. So there is no escape in that direction, and soothing her conscience with the thought that they are at any rate disobeying no commands in thus going to see the procession, Violet endeavours to throw a little more cheerfulness and interest into her manner, though she is very far from feeling cheerful in reality.

By and by the train comes puffing slowly into the station, and the girls quickly take their seats in a first-class carriage, only too thankful to have escaped observation, so far.

"There!" cries Amy, throwing herself back into the cushioned seat, as the train, already so late, moves from the platform almost immediately. "We are safely off now, and, as I said before, there is no going back in the matter. Now, shall I tell you how I have managed it all? Well, you know how Mama and I begged Papa to take a window for us, and how perfectly adamantine he was upon the subject? Well, last night, when he and I were sitting on the lawn after dinner, he put two sovereigns into my hand, saying: 'There, that is to console you for the disappointment about the procession'."

"How kind of him!" remarks Violet, feeling that she is expected to say something, and wondering meanwhile how Bertie is getting on with an exceedingly large cigar, for the convenient smoking of which he has insisted on travelling in a smoking carriage.

"Yes, wasn't it? Well, when I was lying in bed, broad awake, I suddenly thought, why should we not go up together—you, I, and Bertie? This money, I calculated, would just do nicely; and so I settled it right off, and told Mama I should take you out somewhere for the day. I said it would be more pleasant than being indoors, to which she agreed. I never said anything about going for a picnic myself; but she seemed to take it for granted, so, naturally, when she spoke of it as a matter of course, I did not contradict her. Mind, I did it for your sake quite as much as my own, Violet; I hope you believe that."

"Oh, yes! I am sure of that, Amy. But I do hope we shall not get into any scrape over it! I am afraid it is hardly the thing for two girls to be travelling up to town alone on a day like this!"

"Pooh! there is Bertie!"

"Ye—s; oh, yes! But he is not very old, Amy."

"Oh, well, never mind! We are going up to see the grand doings after all, without being under any obligations to soap-boilers!"

Violet winces.

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that, Amy! Everyone says they are very nice, and I have been half-wondering lately whether I have been making a stupid of myself."

Amy stares a little.

"Oh! of course you know your own opinions best. But I did think that they entirely coincided with mine. I suppose you will be visiting at The Towers, then?" This query is put with a little satirical curl of Amy's upper lip.

Again Violet draws herself up.

"I thought I distinctly told you I should not!" she says.

"Well, dear, I am glad of that. Mama and I have quite decided not to call. We consider it would be quite *infra dig.* to do so."

Violet is silent, and as the train steams on its way nearer and nearer to the London terminus, she finds herself wondering how it was she used to be so blind to Amy's faults, and what a pity it is that so bright and clever a girl, as her friend undoubtedly is in many ways, should be so narrow-

minded and illiberal in her ideas. Then, feeling that Amy may think her ungrateful for all her pains, she looks up, with as bright a smile as she can muster.

"How ever are we to manage about seats, Amy? Have you thought of any plan?"

"Well, dear; I doubt if we shall get any actual seats at all. I thought we would just stand on some steps and take our chance. If we are let alone we are sure to see something, and I fancy one can pay a trifle sometimes, just to keep the place."

"Yes. That sounds feasible," says Violet. Then suddenly she sits up, and leaning towards her friend says hastily, though earnestly. "Amy, don't think me unkind, and—and, priggish! but I cannot feel comfortable about all this. I am sure you know yourself really that it is both wrong and very risky too. I have never been in a London crowd, excepting once, when Father took Cinthy and me to the Lord Mayor's Show, and even then Cinthy, somehow, nearly got swept away from us, and I remember being very frightened. I have told you how I feel about it now, and I shall not say another word on the subject, Amy, for I do not want to spoil your

pleasure. There is only one thing. You will not mind my telling Mother about it, will you?"

"Indeed I shall mind,—very much!" cries the girl with energy. "And what is more, Violet: if you dream of doing such a thing, I will never speak to you again! no, never! though you are my dearest friend!"

The tears start to Violet's eyes as she listens, astonished, to this unkind outburst; but she only says, quietly:

"I should be very sorry for such a thing as that to happen, Amy; and I cannot see why you should be so averse to my speaking of this—this—"

"Indiscretion!" suggests Amy, with curling lip.

"Expedition! I was going to say," answers Violet; "but I do think that it would be acting very deceitfully and wrongly altogether to keep it to ourselves; and even apart from that, what would everyone think of us if it came to be discovered afterwards?"

Amy shrugs her shoulders.

"'*Honi soit qui mal y pense*'," she says indifferently. And Violet sees that it is no use pursuing the subject—now, at anyrate.

"Very well," she says. "You must do as you

like, I suppose. Only—don't be cross over it," she adds with a little smile.

"I'm not cross," replies Amy snappishly.

"No, dear, I know. I only said don't be."

CHAPTER X.

A STRING OF MISFORTUNES.

AS the train runs into the station, and the girls alight on the platform, they see, not without dismay, that even here immense crowds are collected, moving in the direction of the Palaces; and while they stand for a few seconds waiting for Bertie to join them, they get hustled and jostled in a manner which casts terror into their souls.

"Good gracious!" gasps Amy, at the same time making a frantic snatch at her hat, which some rough, pushing woman has nearly carried away with her; "I had no idea it would be like this. Oh, where is that boy? whatever is he doing?"

But as she speaks Bertie presents himself before them, heated and indignant at the rough usage he has been forced to submit to at the hands of a party of young roughs who have not been slow

to notice and air their opinions of the dapper "little gent" walking in front of them. One had even gone so far as to tread upon his toes, as if by accident, and another had twitched his eye-glass out of his eye, where, by dint of screwing up the left side of his face into frightful contortions, he was actually contriving to keep it for a few seconds. A third had just tilted his hat over his eyes when, to Bertie's unspeakable relief, a constable appeared on the scene.

"What a time you have been!" gasps Amy, by way of greeting. "Did you ever see such a crowd! I begin to wish we hadn't come. Oh, Violet, whatever shall we do?"

"I think we had better take a cab," promptly replies that young lady, who, though calmer in manner, is every whit as frightened as her friend.

"All wight; I'll hail one." And to his sister's indignation, Bertie makes energetic signs to the driver of a four-wheeler.

"No, no," she cries crossly, "not a growler! What are you thinking about, Bertie? A hansom, of course; you can sit on my knee."

"Thanks, vewy much!—but I'd wather not. You can sit on mine if you like?"

Whereupon brother and sister stand and glare at each other for a second or two, until Violet, throwing herself into the breach, says hastily:

"I don't see that anybody need sit on anyone's knee. Surely we three can squeeze in; and if not, I will sit on Amy's knee."

So the growler being dismissed, and a hansom, with a surly-looking driver, having taken its place, the three proceed to pack themselves into it, not without a few pushings and thumpings from Amy to Bertie during the process, and with a considerable amount of clatter, they drive off; shaving by a hair's-breadth the big, middle lamp-post, as they swing round it out into the open road.

After going along at a swinging trot for some little time, the cabman pulls up in a bye street, and opens the little door at the top. "I can't take you no nearer," he remarks, and slams it down again.

Whereupon ensues a scuffle inside the cab, resulting in the knocking of Bertie's head with the handle of Amy's sunshade, and, a minute after, the triumphant re-opening of the little door above with the other end of it.

"Nonsense!" cries a girl's excited voice; "you must take us nearer!"

"What?" roars the man, looking down through the door.

"I say you must take—"

Here the horse starts off again on his own account, and down goes the door, while the driver engages himself in bringing the cab up to the kerb once more. Then the scuffling inside the cab is resumed, and this time it results in a small, effeminate hand, with a large ring on the little finger, making a clutch at the edge of the roof. Then a face appears, in the left eye of which is screwed an eye-glass, and for a moment the cabman is under the impression that the owner is making faces at him.

"Oh, dash it,—don't you know,—you must take us neawer—than this!" cries Bertie in a series of spasmodic jerks, caused by the awkwardness of his position. "We told you—near St. James's Palace,—don't you know?"

"Well, I know you did," allows the man gruffly. "But for all that I can't take you no nearer. If you look down that 'ere street, you'll see for yourself that all digression is cut off by the military."

"He means 'ingress' I suppose," says Amy impatiently. "Get out, Bert! it's no use wasting

time here. Come along, Violet—good gracious!" And as Amy, now standing on the pavement, puts her hand into her pocket, her face grows pale. "My purse!" she exclaims wildly; I have lost my purse!"

Then they all stand dumbly staring at each other, until Violet says:

"Oh, I daresay it is in another pocket, Amy: feel in them all, dear!"

But though the girl, in her fright and anxiety, turns each one of her pockets inside out separately, the purse is not in any of them.

Then the attention of all three is arrested by the somewhat strange behaviour of the cabman, who, having settled himself comfortably in his little seat, takes out of his pocket a very old and dirty clay pipe, and leisurely proceeds to light and smoke the same.

"Oh, yes!" he remarks presently, taking the pipe from his mouth, "that's a likely story, that is! It's the right sort o' day to play that little trick, I ain't doubtin'; but it won't pay with me. I ain't a-goin' to drive swells like you about for nothing, so I tell you. Come," and the man takes a bullying tone now, "you pay me my fare quick, or I'll know the reason why!"

"Oh, dear me!" cries Amy distractedly; "whatever are we to do, Violet? My good man," turning round to the driver again, "I assure you I am speaking the truth; can't you take my word for it?"

"No. I ain't a-goin' to take your word, nor no one else's. It's no use your 'good man'-ing me, because I means—to—have—my—fare; and I shall sit here till I gets it."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear!" cries Amy again, and wringing her hands, "have you any money with you, Bertie? I know Violet hasn't."

"No, dash it all! I haven't got so much as a bwass farthing! You huwwied me up so in dwessing, don't you know, that I forgot to empty my other pockets into these. It's a dashed nuisance the whole thing! I wish I hadn't come!"

Here a diversion is made by the cabman himself, who, forgetting his determination to sit up there on his perch until he receives his fare, suddenly leans down and whispers confidentially.

"If the little gent likes to give me that 'ere ring of his as secoority, I don't mind calling for the fare to-morrow, if you like?"

The "little gent" is so staggered by the im-

pudence of the man, and the audacity of the proposition, that he remains staring at him in speechless amazement until his eye-glass claims his attention. But the suggestion acts as a lead to Amy, who has been racking her brains to think of a way out of the difficulty.

"You cannot have the ring," she says, standing on tip-toe to make the man hear; "but see, here is a bracelet which is worth more a great deal. If you like to take it now, and then return it to my father at his office in Lombard Street, you can do so; then he will pay you the proper fare."

"Pardon me, madam, but I trust you will do no such thing!" says a voice behind the trio. "The man is a rascal for suggesting such a course. If you will tell me your difficulty, I may perhaps be able to advise you, but I have only overheard the latter part of the dispute."

Amy and Violet glance quickly and simultaneously at the speaker, and the former decides at once that he is a gentleman, and to be trusted.

"Thank you very much," she says. "This man has been very insolent."

Then she pours the tale of their woes into the stranger's attentive ears, until, with a little bow,

he makes it understood that he has now grasped the facts of the case. Taking a gold pencil-case out of his pocket, he presents it to Amy.

"If you will write down your father's name and business address it will be quite sufficient for this fellow," he says. "Take this to that gentleman's office to-morrow," he says, as Amy hands it up to the vanquished and sullen cabman, "and you will receive your proper fare. Good-morning, madam!" and lifting his hat, he includes the three in a sweeping bow, and departs down the street in the wake of the cabman, who has already driven off.

With a sigh of relief the three turn round and make for St. James's Palace, and having arrived in its neighbourhood without any further adventure, they look about them for a favourable spot in which to take up their position. Presently they discover a doorstep which is not quite so crowded as some; they mount the two or three steps, and regardless of the decided looks of unwelcome which are cast upon them by the present occupants of the position, edge their way gradually to one of their own.

It is with a sense of intense relief that the two girls lean against the railings, feeling that, so far

at any rate, their troubles are over, and that they now have a very fair chance of seeing something of the procession, provided they can endure the monotony and fatigue of standing for several hours in all the heat of the mid-day sun, which is mercilessly pouring its rays right down upon them. Once, when Amy makes a movement to open her sunshade, the action is quickly noticed and put a stop to at once.

"You can't open that here, miss! We're all in the same boat as to the heat; and what one can bear another can, I reckon."

And Amy, feeling that so far this is true, resigns herself to circumstances with a sigh.

If it were not for all the little amusing incidents which may be always found in any large public gathering, the heat and cramped positions which they are powerless to remedy would have proved almost too great a trial for their strength and patience. But, with the exception of Bertie, who is distinctly cross, they make praiseworthy efforts to be bright and cheerful, each for the other's sake, and from the very fact of making the effort, the long, tedious wait is far less monotonous than it would otherwise have been.

Presently there is some little disturbance in the

crowd, and eager to see what is going on, Violet and Amy stand on tip-toe and crane their necks over the shoulders of those standing in front of them, as they watch the mounted police back their well-trained horses on to an encroaching band of roughs who are trying, for sheer mischief's sake, to force a way through their ranks.

At the same moment there is some confusion on the lowest step, caused by the abrupt departure of several young men who have hitherto held undisputed possession of the same. In a moment Violet and Amy are pushed forward by those behind, so suddenly that they cannot check themselves, and before they know what is happening, the safe refuge of the step is left behind them, and they are launched into the midst of the densely packed crowd.

Even then all might have been well, for Amy, with a quickness born of despair, had noticed a spot which seemed to her a little less crowded, and dragging Violet after her—Bertie struggling on in the rear,—is forcing her way towards it, when lo! the same band of roughs—which are London's disgrace,—having changed their course on being repelled by the police, come sweeping down the pavement, hand in hand, and six

abreast, driving all before them, and carrying the two frightened girls completely off their feet.

Two piercing cries of "Violet!" "Amy!" and then the two friends are swept asunder; and as Violet, whirled round in one direction, is thrown with violence against some railings, she sees with dismay that Amy is being carried along with resistless force far, far beyond reach of her voice even; and realizing with terror that she is left to battle with this vast crowd, alone and unprotected, her strength, already sorely taxed, gives way altogether, and with swimming head and a sound of rushing waters in her ears, she makes one wild clutch at the railings, losing consciousness even at the same moment that a strong arm is thrown around her.

CHAPTER XI.

IN AN AMBULANCE.

WHEN Violet opens her eyes, they rest first upon a bright, intelligent face which is bending over her watchfully. The owner of this face wears a plainly-made gown of some soft-looking gray stuff, an ample white apron with capacious pockets, and a neat little white cap.

On one sleeve is a large red cross. Leaving the face of the hospital nurse, the girl's eyes travel round the tiny apartment, which is suggestive in all its arrangements of a miniature surgery. They next rest upon the figure of her friend Amy, who, half-lying and half-sitting up on a temporary kind of sofa, is behaving in rather a troublesome manner to another nurse and a young surgeon, who are busily engaged in binding up her head. In the background stand two gentlemen (Marmaduke Sugden and a stranger), hats in hand, and looking as if they do not quite know what to do next. The former moves forward, however, on seeing Violet's eyes open, and comes and stands by the nurse.

"She will do now, sir, I think," the nurse says, looking up at Duke. "At first I was afraid her head had suffered—she was so long in coming out of the swoon. But I do not think there is anything more serious than the arm now, and Mr. Brett and I will soon attend to that."

"When the young lady over there has finished with his services!" says Duke, with a little shrug.

The nurse smiles as she takes out her scissors, preparatory to cutting up Violet's sleeve, while the young fellow moves over to the other side.

"Are you feeling better now?" he asks gently.

Violet turns her large expressive eyes upon the speaker, and as she recognizes the face which is bending down anxiously, a wave of colour passes over her hitherto unnaturally pale cheeks, dyeing them crimson for the moment.

"Thank you," she says, while her lips tremble ominously; "you are very kind. I think I am better now, but my arm is very painful."

Then she turns away her head, for two large tears which have risen to her eyes suddenly make their escape, and roll slowly down her face.

Marmaduke is not like some men, who become enraged at the sight of tears. Instead, a great pity rises up in his heart for the girl before him, who, if she has been acting wrongfully and deceitfully, is surely now suffering sufficient punishment for her misdeeds.

"I am so sorry," he says, referring to the pain of the arm, "but I am also so glad that I happened to be near, and was in time to save you from worse harm. This gentleman," indicating the now solitary figure in the corner of the hospital ambulance, "was kind enough to protect your friend, who was separated entirely from you."

At this mention of him, Amy's rescuer comes

forward; and Violet, in a few words, thanks him for his rescue of her friend.

"I am only too glad to have been of service to your friend," he says simply. "I do not think she is much hurt, but she had a nasty fall before I could reach her. You appear to know the ladies," he continued, turning to Marmaduke and looking at his watch, "so I will now resign both to your care."

Amy, meanwhile, is still in the thick of an argument with Mr. Brett and the nurse—both of whom are rapidly losing all patience with her—as to the necessity or otherwise of her head being bandaged.

"We cannot travel home all bandaged and bundled up like two Egyptian mummies!" she cries, regardless of her friend's frowns and nods in the direction of the already departing figure of her rescuer. "Besides, how could I get my hat on?"

But here the other nurse joins the trio, thinking, with her superior authority, to bring the girl to reason; and after a little more light skirmishing, Amy at length allows her objections to be over-ruled, and submits to the bandaging quietly, though with a very bad grace.

In the meantime Marmaduke sits beside Violet, looking with concern at the poor bruised arm, which, bared up to above the elbow, lies awaiting the surgeon's examination.

"Is it very painful?" he asks again presently, partly for the sake of saying something.

"A little," replies the girl, in a low voice. Then, suddenly turning a pair of troubled eyes upon her companion, she says: "You are very kind to me, kinder than I deserve. Would you —would you mind telling me how it all happened?"

So Marmaduke, rather relieved to have something tangible to talk about, tells her how he had first noticed herself and Amy amongst the crowd, going on quickly to his timely arrival on the scene, and how he had carried her in a fainting condition to the nearest ambulance, where he had found Amy already established, the nurses busy stemming the flow of blood from a nasty cut across her forehead. As he comes to the end of his narrative, a diversion is caused by Amy, who, suddenly sitting up and looking wildly round at everyone in turn, inquires excitedly:

"Bertie! where is Bertie? Whatever has become of him? I have neither seen nor thought

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BERTIE SITS UPON THE DOOR-STEP, HATLESS, AND WITH A GENERAL AIR OF DEJECTION.

of him since we were all pushed off those steps." In a moment Marmaduke has jumped up from his seat.

"By Jove!" he cries, "I had forgotten him too, though I saw him with you in the crowd at first. Don't alarm yourself, Miss Lawrence, I beg. I will go and have a look round at once. But I suppose he would be able to look after himself?"

"I don't know," replies Amy, with sisterly frankness; "Bertie is so stupid!"

This confidence is lost upon Duke, however, for he is off already, and once more pushing his way through the crowd, looking from right to left and from left to right in search of the missing youth. Presently he comes to a door-step only a few paces from the scene of the disturbance, and here, seated upon the top step, hatless, and with a general air of utter dejection, Duke finds the object of his search.

"Oh, dash it! don't you know," he remarks, as he rises slowly and cautiously from his temporary seat; "blest if I didn't think I was going to be left here all the blessed day! A nice thing for those girls to go and leave a fellow like this; and my eye-glass gone too. I'll be hanged if I ever come out with them again! I've had a beastly

knock on the head, too, from someone who thought he was being vewy funny; and I've lost my hat, hang it all!"

Marmaduke looks down with some contempt at the miserable little object before him, and then he says, with a spice of severity in his voice:

"I am sorry you have been so unfortunate; but you are not the only one. You had better get up and come with me, I think. Your sister and Miss Vereker have met with a slight accident, and they are in that ambulance yonder. I should have thought you might have afforded them better protection than this!"

"It's all very well to talk," grumbles Bertie, as he follows young Sugden, too miserable and crestfallen to resent the somewhat plain speech. "Amy is so independent, there's no doing anything with her, and Miss Veweker is not much better. It was they who left me, not I them, hang it all!"

During his absence Violet's arm has been duly examined, dressed with some cooling lotion, and bandaged up; and Violet herself, looking better, but still pale, is standing up and putting on her hat with the assistance of the nurse, the damaged arm having been carefully stowed away in a sling. She is looking a little anxiously towards the door

as Marmaduke enters, and her face brightens considerably as he comes towards her.

"I was afraid something might prevent you returning," she explains hastily. "We have had such a terrible day altogether that I suppose I have got stupid and nervous."

Here Marmaduke's attention is claimed by Mr. Brett, who, coming up to where he and Violet are standing, says cheerfully:

"I think this young lady's arm will be all right now; but she should be careful to give it complete rest for some time, as it is a good deal bruised. At first I was afraid it was a fracture, but I am glad to say it is not. Can I do anything for you, sir?" This last question is addressed to Bertie, who certainly looks an object of pity.

"I should be glad of a bwandy and soda," replies that youth with alacrity; "that is, if you have got such a thing about the place," and he looks doubtfully at the collection of medicine bottles.

"I am afraid I cannot oblige you in that respect," replies Mr. Brett, biting his lip to prevent himself laughing, "but I shall be pleased to mix you some sal volatile. You look as if you needed something!"

"I don't mind," says Bertie sulkily. "I feel beastly seedy, that's all I know. Hallo, Amy! are you hurt?"

"Yes, I am hurt, thanks to your kind care!" and Amy casts contemptuous and indignant glances at her brother from underneath her bandage. Here Mr. Brett presents Bertie with his dose, which the latter gentleman drinks with many a wry face.

"Pah!" he exclaims, putting the glass down. "It's beastly stuff. Thanks all the same though, of course. Now, if you and Miss Veweker are weady, I should think we'd better be off home. It's no use thinking of trying to see anything with your head bandaged up like that."

"You are very kind," remarks Amy, with a sneer; "but if it is quite the same to you, I would rather travel with someone who owns a hat."

"By Jove!" cries poor Bertie, putting his hands up to his head; "I'm hanged if I hadn't forgotten all about my hat. Wha—what the dickens am I to do?"

"It is certainly a very awkward situation," says Duke, who feels half sorry for the boy. "But, upon my word, I do not see what can be done. The shops are all shut, of course, and there would

not be a single person at his post to-day, so there is no chance of borrowing one. I think the sooner a move is made the better, for there will be fewer people about now than later. If you will not mind waiting one moment I will run over and tell my mother they need not wait for me. Our window is only just opposite, you know."

"Your window!" gasp Violet and Amy in a breath.

"Yes," replies Duke, not noticing the consternation with which this information has been received. "So, of course, I shall not be long."

"Be long? Are you coming with us then? Oh, I am so glad!" cries Amy, suddenly going over to the enemy. "Bertie is no better than a baby, and you will at any rate take care of us."

Fortunately all the streets, excepting those actually in the line of procession, are very nearly deserted; and the strange-looking party thus escape much of the inquisitive observation which they would otherwise have been forced to submit to.

The journey is for the most part performed in silence, until they begin to near The Châlet, when Duke busies himself in helping the girls to make the best of their appearance.

Mrs. Lawrence's first move on perceiving the injured trio is to utter a piercing scream and go off into violent hysterics; in the midst of which she is promptly picked up and carried to her bedroom by her husband, who fortunately happens to be on the spot. Leaving her there in the charge of a maid, he hastens down to the drawing-room again.

"Good heavens, Amy!" he cries, aghast at the bewildering sight before him; "what is the meaning of all this? Mr. Sugden, pray be seated, sir. Perhaps you can explain this extraordinary proceeding."

"You needn't bother Mr. Sugden about it, Papa," puts in Amy rather defiantly. "I should think he is bored enough already, and if it hadn't been for him we might have been brought home in so many small pieces, instead of only being hurt slightly. I can explain it all in two seconds! We have been up to see the royal procession and have met with some rough handling—that's all!"

"Oh, indeed,—is it!" says Mr. Lawrence with some asperity. "That explanation may be enough for you, but I should like to be a little further enlightened, if you please."

But at this moment a ghastly pallor overspreads

Amy's face, and without a word of warning she falls back in her chair in a dead faint. General consternation ensues, in the midst of which Mrs. Miles, the housekeeper opportunely arrives on the scene, having been summoned from the back regions by the butler.

Mr. Lawrence then remembers the presence of his rather unwilling guest.

"Pray, pardon my neglect," he says courteously; "You must think us very neglectful, I fear? But really, I cannot understand this affair at all, and I feel greatly worried about it."

But Duke quickly dispels Mr. Lawrence's fears on this score, and proceeds to tell him—so far as he knows it himself—the story of the day's doings.

"Why, bless my soul, Mr. Sugden," exclaims Mr. Lawrence, pulling up suddenly in the middle of the carriage drive, whither they have drifted during their conversation, "they might have been killed, had it not been for your timely aid! I am sure neither Mrs. Vereker nor I will ever be able to thank you sufficiently for your kindness to those two foolish girls."

"Oh, that is nothing!" replies Marmaduke lightly. "I am only thankful that I was on the spot at the time. Can I do anything more for

you in the matter, sir? I shall be passing the doctor's house on my way home, and will leave a message there if you like. I will also let Mr. and Mrs. Vereker know of their daughter's accident."

Mr. Lawrence thankfully accepting this offer, Duke takes his departure.

The doctor's report is altogether more favourable than might have been expected.

"I do not suppose the wound on Miss Lawrence's head will prove serious in the least," he says; "but I am sorry to say she will carry an ugly scar down to her grave with her. However, we must be thankful that it is no worse. The nervous system of both the young ladies has received a very severe shock though, and it will be necessary to keep them exceedingly quiet for the next few days at any rate."

So while Amy is packed off to bed without further loss of time, Violet is tucked up comfortably on a sofa in the drawing-room, there to await further orders.

In the meantime, Marmaduke makes his way to the station, with the intention of waiting there until the arrival of The Towers party, which will, of course, include the Verekers as well. He has

calculated to a nicety the time at which he considers they ought to be back, and anxious to get over his self-imposed and rather unpleasant task of informing Mr. and Mrs. Vereker of their daughter's rash act and its consequences, he lays a detaining hand on Mrs. Vereker's arm at once.

"May I speak a few words to you before you start for home?" he asks courteously.

Then in as few words as possible he makes known to them the facts of the case; dwelling as lightly as possible on those points which, he feels instinctively, are likely to cause the parents most pain. During his short walk back to The Towers, Duke is persistently haunted by the memory of a pair of large, mournful eyes, which only an hour or two ago had looked up so wistfully into his own: and it is with a feeling of half regret, half relief that here his own responsibility in the afternoon's adventure ends, that he slowly goes upstairs to his room to dress for dinner.

CHAPTER XII.

AN EXPLANATION.

MR. AND MRS. VEREKER find Mr. Lawrence waiting to receive them when they arrive at The Châlet, and after a few hurried words together, Mrs. Vereker goes quietly into the drawing-room where, sitting down by the sofa, she looks with tearful eyes at the pale face of her daughter, who lies sleeping peacefully and quietly in that dreamless sleep which generally follows exhaustion of mind and body alike. Some sound outside presently rouses the sleeper, however, and turning round with a little moan, her eyes rest upon the figure beside her.

"Mother!" she cries; and there is a strange mingling of joy, sorrow, and remorse in the cry, as the poor girl throws herself into the arms opened wide to receive her. "Oh, Mother, Mother! can you ever forgive me?" she pleads, when her sobs grow less frequent. "Indeed, indeed, I never meant to do it, and I cannot think how I can have allowed myself to be persuaded into doing anything that I knew was wrong. Oh, what must you think of me, you and Papa both!"

"There, there, my love!" says Mrs. Vereker, gently stroking her daughter's hair. "Do not fret over it any more now. I am certain that you are very truly sorry for having deceived your father and myself, and you have been shown to-day—far more clearly than we could ever show you,—the full extent of your wrong, by One against whom you have sinned even more than against us."

Then mother and daughter sit for a few minutes longer, talking in low, subdued tones, the one lovingly and soothingly, the other sadly and thoughtfully. For if the mother can forgive the daughter for the doings of that day, the daughter cannot forgive herself; and many a quiet tear is still shed as Violet lies, tightly clasping her mother's hand, and listening to her kind and comforting words.

"And now, dear," says Mrs. Vereker presently, "we had better be starting. Masters will be quite tired of walking the horses up and down, and if we stay much longer he will be seriously displeased with us!"

"One moment, Mother!" cries Violet, starting up and stretching out her uninjured hand; "promise me, will you, that you will not be hard upon Amy when you see her. I know how wrong you must

think it of her to have planned the expedition beforehand. But, dear Mother, I am sure she is sorry now, and she was hurt much more than I."

"My dear, I am sure I have no wish to be hard upon the poor girl, even if I had the right to be so. After all the painful consequences of to-day's venturesome act, I feel almost as sorry for her as I do for you; though I cannot deny, of course, that hers was by far the greater fault of the two, and had you been in her place I should have said exactly the same of my own daughter. Now I must really go and speak to Mr. Lawrence, since Mrs. Lawrence is invisible. There is Masters drawing up at the door for the fourth time!"

So before another ten minutes have passed, Violet, to her infinite pleasure and relief, is being driven home, seated beside her mother, on whose shoulder her tired and aching head leans, while Mr. Vereker repeatedly pats the little hand resting on his knee in an encouraging and sympathetic manner which almost makes Violet smile. On reaching home, the girl is immediately despatched to bed; and Mrs. Vereker, telling the whole story to the rest of the party afterwards in the drawing-room, makes a special request that the subject of the accident, indeed, of the whole affair, shall be

carefully avoided, unless broached by Violet herself.

"Your father and I have talked it over," says Mrs. Vereker, addressing her two daughters, "and we think this will be the safest and most complete way of carrying out Dr. Moore's orders; which are, that Violet is to be kept perfectly quiet. She has had punishment enough already, poor child, and if no one alludes to the matter at all, there will be no risk of hurting her feelings or agitating her in any way. Geoff must be made to understand this. I think you had better take him in hand, Cinthy. You generally manage to impress him with the idea that you mean what you say!"

To carry out the doctor's orders for "quiet" even more religiously, a dinner party, which was to have been given the next evening, partly in honour of the Sugdens, and partly to inaugurate the arrival of Sir Charles and Lady Fairfax, is put off indefinitely.

Charley, it is scarcely needful to say, is secretly delighted at this decision, and informs Cinthy, in strict confidence, that he feels devoutly thankful when he thinks that Violet's escapade has borne such excellently good fruit as the indefinite postponement of a dinner party, which might even

reasonably be expected never to come off at all now!

Notwithstanding this reprieve, however, poor Charley is made supremely wretched and miserable during the quiet week which follows on more than one occasion. For Iris mercilessly drags him out with her to return calls in the neighbourhood, and he is forced to sit by her ladyship's side in the victoria, decorously attired in a frock-coat and tall hat, both of which his soul abhors, behind Masters, in whose stately and dignified presence the unhappy young man declares he dare not speak above a whisper! His mental anguish is considerably added to on one of these visiting expeditions by an unfortunate accident; which is nothing more nor less than the breaking of one of Mrs. Sugden's delicate Sèvres tea-cups, which he whisks off a little table with his elbow. He is so disturbed in his mind at this catastrophe, which he feels instinctively is a really direful one somehow, that he presently draws his friend Jimmy into a secluded corner, there to ask his private opinion about getting the cup "mended"!

"Will it mend, do you think?" he asks, looking searchingly into the other's face as if his very life hung upon the answer.

"Well," replies Jimmy, thoughtfully stroking his chin, "I don't quite know about mending. You see, I doubt if it would hold hot tea afterwards! But hang it all! don't bother over it, old man! Of course you can match any of these things at the first china shop!" Which shows Mr. James Sugden's lamentable ignorance in such matters, though the reply serves to comfort Charley for the rest of his visit.

Altogether, the lazy monotony of each day as it comes and goes exactly suits Charley Fairfax; and as Violet—though carefully kept out of the way of any chance visitors,—is allowed to roam about the grounds at will, amusing herself as she pleases, he constitutes himself her faithful attendant in her daily airings; carrying work-basket, books, and sunshade with a meekness and docility which, Cinthy declares, almost rivals that of Donald, the red collie, who loves nothing better than to be made a beast of burden. Sometimes he smokes cigarettes by the dozen; lying on his back full length upon the cool grass, with his cap tilted over his eyes. And sometimes he will graciously offer to read to Violet, heroically strangling prodigious yawns for the purpose until, more often than not, he goes to sleep!

One afternoon a few days later, Mrs. Vereker is just about to start off for a drive with her eldest daughter, when Violet runs out on to the steps.

"Are you going on a round of calls, Mother?" she asks.

"No, dear, not calls. But I shall come home by The Châlet and inquire how Amy is getting on. I heard that she was out for the first time yesterday."

"Oh! I am so glad you are going there, because I want so to send a message to Amy about that new wool. And, Mother, do try and persuade her to come to the garden-party next week. She said, you know, that she would never go anywhere again with that cut on her forehead. But she cannot shut herself up all her life, and I think as the party has been put off once already, she ought to try and come."

Mrs. Vereker half smiles at the implied reproach in Violet's words, but she passes it by, merely saying:

"Yes, certainly, dear; I will try and induce her to come, and from what I hear she will be quite well enough, I should think."

On inquiring for Mrs. Lawrence at The Châlet,

Mrs. Vereker is informed that that lady is out, but Miss Lawrence is in; and very soon she is seated beside the girl, talking to her, and entering into all her little personal affairs in a kind and motherly fashion which quite wins Amy's heart.

When, therefore, after the two have sat quietly talking for a time, Amy suddenly darts off at a tangent, and herself introduces the tabooed subject, Mrs. Vereker learns for the first time the real facts of the case; for Amy never does things by halves, and having it rather on her conscience that she has been tacitly allowing her friend to bear more blame than she deserved, she impulsively volunteers a truthful and exact account of the manner in which she had led Violet astray, and how Violet herself had pleaded and begged (at the risk of losing her, Amy's, friendship) to be allowed at least to tell her parents of the expedition on their return home.

"I don't know, I'm sure, if Violet meant to say anything to you or not," concludes the girl after her tale is ended; "but I feel now that I behaved rather unkindly about it, for I know it was the deception of the whole thing that troubled her more than anything else. I cannot bear, too, to feel that she has been shut up at home, suffering

with her arm, just because of my wickedness and nothing else. Ah! I wish we had been brought up to be truthful!"

"My dear," says Mrs. Vereker, gently taking possession of one of the girl's hands, "you are old enough to judge for yourself in such matters as these, and to be truthful for 'truth's sake'. As to the question of telling us what you had both done, you see it was not left in your hands to decide; and I think you and also Violet must feel very thankful that this was so, now that you have had time and opportunity to think it all over quietly. It is a merciful thing that matters are thus often taken out of our hands, for we are thereby saved from many a grievous error; errors, indeed, which might in some cases overshadow our whole lives, aye, and sometimes those of others."

And Amy, accepting, and even feeling grateful for this mild lecture, sits listening in subdued silence to these and other kind and motherly words, with a humility hitherto quite foreign to her nature. In her innermost heart she cannot help contrasting the wide difference with which her friend's mother and her own have treated the whole affair from beginning to end. The one so

full of kindness and sympathy, and making ample allowance for the temptation of the moment; the other, looking at the matter from one narrow point of view only, and considering herself by far the most injured person of the party.

By the time Mrs. Vereker rises to take her leave, Amy is feeling happier than she has done for some days past; and while the mother cannot help rejoicing in her heart at the knowledge that her daughter is less to blame than she had even supposed her to be, she does not fail to let Amy see how greatly she appreciates her spontaneous confession, which has evidently been made chiefly in her anxiety to exonerate Violet from any undeserved blame.

Before finally taking leave of the girl, Mrs. Vereker gives Violet's message about the garden-party, adding her own persuasions also that she will come if well enough.

So at last a half-reluctant promise is drawn from Amy, and Mrs. Vereker, finding that she has kept Iris waiting longer than she had any intention of doing, hurries out to the carriage.

Left to herself, Amy leans back upon her cushions, with knitted brows and a weary sigh of impatience. To tell the truth, the thought of

her own mother's utter want of sympathy and kindness is still rankling in her heart, and it is in anything but a dutiful spirit, therefore, that she receives her on her return home from a round of calls.

"If you had called on the Sugdens, as everyone else has, this would never have happened at all, probably!" she says defiantly. "Directly the Verekers lost their chance of a window for the procession, Mr. Sugden invited them to share his, and why? Because they had been civil to his people; and if we had been civil to them, they would have asked us too, most likely!"

Mrs. Lawrence stares at her daughter for a minute or two in blank astonishment.

"But, my dear Amy, you are surely forgetting? I fancied you had quite the same views as myself about calling on these people?"

"Well, perhaps I had at one time," retorts Amy, with a petulant push of her cushions. "But I consider it was your place, Mama, to show me that I was making a mistake, instead of leaving it for other people to do. We shall be the laughing-stock of the whole neighbourhood soon! Everyone but ourselves has called!"

"Everyone has not called, Amy. I am quite

sure Lady Laura Lennox would not demean herself by so doing, and as she is the leader in all social affairs here, I should not think of calling upon anyone until I knew she intended doing so."

"Well, I should like to know how we are to continue visiting other people, at whose houses we shall be constantly running up against the Sugdens," continues Amy. "And that reminds me. I don't know what you intend to do about the Verekers' garden-party, but I intend to go."

"Intend to go! Good gracious, Amy! What are you talking about? How can you go? Such a sight as you have made of yourself!"

"Thank you, Mama; you need not be always throwing it in my teeth! If others can put up with my appearance, I should think you might. But it seems to me that I get more kindness from strangers than from my own mother."

"Amy! how dare you talk to me like that?" And Mrs. Lawrence has recourse to a marvellous piece of cambric and lace, which she draws from her pocket for the purpose of wiping away some imaginary tears.

At this critical moment, while Mrs. Lawrence is debating behind her handkerchief whether a mild fit of hysterics would not bring her daughter

to reason and also be a fitting termination to the "scene", her husband suddenly walks in, to Amy's decided relief and her mother's secret consternation.

"What's the matter?" demands Mr. Lawrence.

"I have just been telling Mama that I mean to go to the Verekers' garden-party on Friday," answers Amy, "and she does not like it, because of having to meet the Sugdens, and—partly, I think,—because of my appearance."

"But you have called, I suppose?" queries Mr. Lawrence of his wife.

"Indeed, I have done nothing of the kind. Nor shall I, until I know whether Lady Laura Lennox intends doing so. I—"

"Well, look here!" suddenly interrupts her husband. "I called on Mr. Sugden yesterday!—under the impression that you had already been, of course. I considered it my duty to do so, especially when his son has laid us under an obligation to his family. What they will think of you now I cannot tell, and if any unpleasantness should come of your neglect, you will remember that you have brought it entirely on yourself. As for you, Amy, I am glad to see you have come to your senses about this matter; and if you really

wish to go to this garden-party you shall go, even if I have to take you myself."

"Thank you, Papa. It is not that I want to go so much," and a painful flush rises to the girl's face, "but I have promised Mrs. Vereker, and therefore I had made up my mind to go, chaperone or no chaperone! I daresay Mama will take me if I really want her to," she adds, anxious to make the peace.

"Of course I shall, if you really wish it, Amy. I am in the habit of sacrificing myself where my children's interests are concerned, and should not, I hope, hesitate to do so on this occasion. Besides, this is an utterly different matter. I can visit those who are my own friends and equals without being bound to associate with all their guests, I suppose!"

And, rising from her chair with an air of offended dignity, Mrs. Lawrence sails out of the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

A GARDEN-PARTY AT THE WILLOWS.

THE morning of Friday, the day fixed for the Verekers' large garden-party, rises fair and cloudless as ever, and the heat, if anything, is greater than that of the past week.

So all the guests, who are numerous, are only too glad to sit and walk about quietly in the pretty grounds of The Willows, which, under the cunning hands of old Gaffer, the head-gardener, are laid out and made to appear a great deal larger than they really are.

There has been tennis for the young people, of course, but only a few have played, they being quite as eager as their elders to avail themselves of the welcome shade of the fine old trees; and as they sit, dotted about in little groups, eating their ices, which they prefer to take out of the close atmosphere of the refreshment-tent, and listening to the sweet strains from the Hungarian Band, whose services Mr. Vereker has secured for the day, they make a pretty sight, with their delicately-hued summer frocks and smart hats and

bonnets, which vie in prettiness with the bright, smiling faces beneath them.

Notwithstanding the fact, however, that everyone is looking gay and happy, there are three at least present on this gloriously sunshiny afternoon whose hearts are anything but in touch with the bright surroundings.

To Violet, who has been secretly dreading the day ever since it was fixed, the ordeal of having to meet Marmaduke Sugden on terms of friendship is perfect torture! The idea had been bad enough in the first instance, when it was only Amy who had benefited by his kindness. But now—when she herself is under quite as deep an obligation to him, if not deeper, indeed, her dread of meeting him is even greater than before. To her dying day, Violet feels she can never forget the kind, almost brotherly, protection he had afforded them that day, and with what gentlemanly tact and good feeling he had taken the whole matter in hand, evincing no surprise at the fact of finding them alone in London on such a day, asking no questions, but simply lending himself to the emergency with one aim and object in view, that of making the best of the situation for the sake of the poor unfortunate girls themselves.

While Violet is engaged with these and similar reflections, Amy Lawrence is running the gauntlet of all the glances of curiosity which are being levelled at her; chiefly by the residents of the immediate neighbourhood, who are, of course, thoroughly versed in the story of the two girls' late escapade, which has gained, in its transition from one house to another, almost incredible proportions.

As for Mrs. Lawrence, her feelings are anything but enviable. For one thing she is secretly annoyed at having to bring Amy with her at all to-day. She has, of course, duly informed her husband and daughter, in the usual formula, that it is entirely for the latter's sake that she is setting aside her own feelings and going out at all in such extreme heat. But at the same time she would have been very well pleased to leave her daughter at home, and—"as a duty to dear Mrs. Vereker"—go by herself, in order to show off the very last thing in gowns and bonnets, which she has insisted on having down from London expressly for the occasion.

As she walks gracefully and languidly through the gardens with Amy by her side, bowing and smiling, first this way then that, in her inner-

most heart she feels angry with herself, angrier with the Sugdens, and, most of all, angry with Amy; for she had depended on the last to support her in what she calls her "principles", and to find that her daughter has gone over to the enemy, and deserted her in her hour of need, is a bitter pill which she indeed finds it hard to swallow.

Presently a tall, gentlemanly-looking young fellow passes them, laughing and talking gaily with Charley Fairfax and his wife, and one or two others. He is looking away in another direction as the little party approaches Mrs. Lawrence and her daughter, but as his eyes suddenly rest on Amy, a friendly smile of recognition lights up his face, as with a little bow which includes both ladies, he lifts his hat and passes on.

"Who was that, Amy? What a distinguished-looking young man!" whispers Mrs. Lawrence, turning down a side path, in order to get another glimpse of the retreating party. "He must have come down from London, I should think. Anyone can see that he is an aristocrat from his manner and bearing."

"Oh, that was Marmaduke Sugden!" answers Amy briefly, and thoroughly enjoying the joke.

"Nonsense, child! I meant the other one, of course—the one who was talking to Iris Fairfax."

"Oh, that was Jimmy, his brother!"

"Amy, what are you thinking about? Jimmy, too! I did not mean either of those young men, of course."

"Well, Mama, the only other gentlemen were Sir Charles Fairfax and Harold Graham. They—why, Mama, what is the matter?"

For Mrs. Lawrence has suddenly come to a standstill in the middle of the path, and while she grasps Amy's arm so as to almost hurt her, she stares straight before her at two ladies who are seated together on a garden seat, talking in low, confidential tones—Lady Laura Lennox and Mrs. Sugden.

All the set society smiles with which Mrs. Lawrence's face was wreathed but a moment since have fled from it now, as she realizes, too late, how great is the mistake she has made in holding aloof from the latter lady, and as she quickly turns and retraces her steps to the more frequented part of the garden, her one idea is to get away at once on any pretext. Seeing her hostess standing, for a wonder, quite by herself,

M 299

"WELL, MAMA, THE ONLY GENTLEMEN WERE—WHY, MAMA, WHAT *IS* THE MATTER?"

she hastens up to her, and with many flowery speeches excuses herself from staying any longer on the plea of sudden headache.

"But you will leave Amy with us?" queries Mrs. Vereker, noticing the look of disappointment on the girl's face, and rightly construing the same. "Violet will be quite distressed if her friend leaves so early."

"Oh, if you do not mind having her, I am sure I shall be delighted! I should be grieved for the dear child's pleasure to be curtailed on my account."

And with a gentle squeeze of Mrs. Vereker's hand, and a faint, languid smile, Mrs. Lawrence moves away towards the gates, leaning gracefully on her daughter's arm.

"Whatever is this all about, Mama?" demands Amy presently, when they are safely out of Mrs. Vereker's hearing.

"Why, cannot you see, child? I do not want the Sugdens to see me here. If they think I was not present at all they may put down my not having called before to illness or anything. No doubt they have heard what wretched nerves I possess. Did you not see to whom Mrs. Sugden was talking, and evidently in a most friendly,

confidential manner? Why, Lady Laura Lennox herself!"

"O—h!" replies Amy, slowly and thoughtfully. "Then you will call at The Towers now, I suppose?"

"Of course I shall call, at the first opportunity!" replies Mrs. Lawrence, with dignity. "There, you had better go back, Amy; here is your father, he can look after me now."

So the girl retraces her steps, and presently she meets Violet coming from the other direction.

"Where have you been hiding yourself?" exclaims the latter, turning round and linking her arm within her friend's. "I have been hunting for you everywhere. Mabel Sugden and Cinthy are over there having no end of fun! Shall I introduce you?" and Violet scans Amy's face a little curiously.

"Oh, no! at least I don't think so. You see it is so awkward, Violet. I can see plainly enough now what a stupid I have made of myself, and even Mama is bent on calling on Mrs. Sugden with all possible speed, now that she finds we are literally the only people who have not called. I can't help seeing, of course, that they are nice,

well-bred, and that sort of thing, you know. By the by, where is your knight-errant, Violet?"

"He—if you mean Mr. Sugden—is quite as much your knight-errant as mine!" replies Violet. "We both owe our lives to him, that is, I partly, you quite!"

"Ah, yes, to be sure! But there is a wide difference all the same; for I have been rude to him, and you have not!"

"Well, I feel as if I had been, at any rate," says Violet, in a pained voice. "If I was not actually uncharitable and rude in speech, I am sure I was in spirit, and I don't see, therefore, where your 'wide difference' lies! I hate myself for it all now, Amy! and—forgive me,—you too sometimes!"

Amy laughs a little, low, amused laugh.

"All right, dear; hate away! You don't mean it, of course, but I know just how you feel: honestly, I should feel exactly the same myself. I am learning to judge now, Violet, between the ring of true and false metal, and I am not above confessing that, whatever his descent may be, Marmaduke Sugden is a true gentleman at heart. There! I have given you quite a moral lecture, haven't I? See, let us sit down under this tree

for a minute or two, and then I will further consider the advisability or otherwise of being introduced to Mabel Sugden. I have a great mind to let you introduce me to them all, Violet, so as to steal a march upon Mama! By the by, you know she has gone home, I suppose?"

Here Mrs. Vereker's voice is heard calling Violet, and seeing that Cinthy, Marmaduke Sugden, and several other young people are making their way towards herself and Amy, she obeys the summons with alacrity, still anxious as ever to put off the evil moment of meeting with young Sugden.

"You will not be left alone, Amy," she cries quickly running off. And in another moment she is by her mother's side, who, it appears, only wants her to take a message indoors to one of the servants. Having performed her errand, the girl goes slowly out into the garden again, but before joining the gay throng assembled on the lawn, she turns down a sheltered little path, on either side of which is a fine privet hedge, and which leads to a very respectable maze, in regard to size. Here she wanders up and down, plucking little bits off the hedge as she goes, glad of the few minutes' quiet after the noise and fatigue of the

past hour or so. She is just about to return, feeling that she has absented herself from her mother's guests longer than she ought to have done, when someone comes hastily round the corner, and in another moment Violet stands face to face with Marmaduke Sugden.

"Ah, here you are at last, Miss Vereker!" he cries gaily. "I have been hunting for you high and low. Your mother asked me to try and find you, and when I asked your sister where you were likely to be, she directed me here, in the fervent hope, I believe, that I might roam into the maze and get lost therein!"

"How wicked of her!" answers Violet, striving desperately to appear at her ease. "And now that you have found me?" she queries, standing still in the middle of the path; while her manner plainly adds—"you can give me my message and go!"

"Well, I must take you back with me! that is what I was sent for."

So the two walk slowly down the path together, Violet silent, and feeling intensely uncomfortable, and Duke wondering a little at her constrained manner.

"Do you know," he says presently, looking

down into the small face on a level with his shoulder, "that I have tried ever so many times this afternoon to speak to you, but each time you have managed to escape me! One would almost have thought you were trying to avoid me!" he adds laughing.

"I— I have been doing my best to help Mother," replies the girl, blushing furiously. "There seem such a number of people here to-day."

"Yes, of course; I know. See what it is to be the eldest daughter of the house! Nell—my eldest sister—groans dismally whenever we have a crush on hand! You must let me introduce you to her: my mother you know, of course; but Nell tells me she has not spoken to you yet."

"Yes, I should like to know her," says Violet, thawing a little. "She looks as if she would be nice—I mean, I think I should like her."

"Oh, I am sure you would! and she is very anxious to know you. Ah, I see her just over there, under those trees; may I take you to her now?"

But here Cinthy makes a rush at them from another direction, her eyes shining with excitement.

"We've got such a splendid plan!" she cries breathlessly. "A dance on the lawn, after all the old fogies are gone! Papa has arranged for the band to stay longer, and they are to have a sort of high tea in the tent presently, while we have a scratch meal in the dining-room. "Won't it be jolly?"

"Cinthy! what expressions you do use," says Violet loftily. "Before a stranger, too!"

Cinthy stares for a moment, while Duke looks distinctly hurt.

"I do not look upon Mr. Sugden as a 'stranger', Violet, and you know him a great deal better than I do!" remarks the younger girl with her usual outspokenness. But though well meant, the remark makes the situation even more awkward, and the sight of Bertie Lawrence, got up in irreproachable attire, coming towards them from the distance, is for once a positively welcome one to them all.

"Well, Mr. Lawrence," exclaims Cinthy, facing round upon her devoted admirer; "have you found my sunshade yet? Oh, thank you so much! Now shall we three take a turn round the maze? Mr. Sugden has never seen it, of course, and I don't think you know it very well, Mr. Lawrence?"

And Cinthy, on mischief intent, leads the way down the first alley, while Violet, with a little murmured "Excuse me" to Duke, gladly makes her escape.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MOONLIGHT DANCE AND ITS ENDING.

IT is going on for ten o'clock; and to the measured rise and fall of the sweet strains of Gungl's last waltz, divers couples may be seen gliding round the Verekers' well-kept lawn, which, owing to the prolonged dry weather, is as smooth and slippery as the carefully waxed floor of any ball-room. The elders of the party are seated together in little groups, sipping their coffee or claret-cup, and talking in low, confidential tones as they watch the pretty scene before them and discuss the respective merits of the dancers.

In a cosy nook, near a tree, but not beneath it, as Miss Eliza Sugden is careful to point out, sits that lady, with Iris Fairfax and Violet. The latter has just been telling them the story of Cinthy's wickedness in luring Bertie Lawrence into the maze, and there leaving him, when Duke

Sugden, tacking carefully in and out of the dancers, makes his way towards the little group, a coffee-cup in one hand, an ice in the other.

"I hope you are not tired of waiting, Lady Fairfax?" And Duke hands the ice to her ladyship, and the coffee to his aunt. "May I not get you something also?" he inquires, turning towards Violet. But Violet has only just had something, so she declares, and she leans back in her chair, silent and—to all appearances—pre-occupied. Presently Duke comes round and takes the vacant chair by her side.

"Will you give me the next waltz?" he asks.

"Thanks," she says, constrainedly. "I—I do not think—, that is, I am tired, and shall not dance any more to-night."

"Yes, you looked tired: the heat of the day and all the excitement have been too much for you, I expect. I am afraid you are not by any means strong yet," he adds kindly.

"Oh, yes! I am perfectly well. But of course the heat is trying: we have had it for so long." And Violet passes her hand over her forehead wearily, and with a little smothered sigh.

"My dear," says Miss Sugden, laying her hand upon the girl's arm; "who is that ludicrous little

fellow who is waltzing—if you can call it waltzing—with your sister? He looks as if he were trying to run away from her at every step, and he is working her arm up and down like a pump-handle!"

Violet looks towards the couple indicated, not without some misgivings.

"Oh, that," she says, half laughing, half vexed, "is Mr. Lawrence, the brother of my friend Amy."

"Oh, indeed! Yes, I remember Miss Lawrence—a rather good-looking girl, and clever, I should think. Duke, my dear boy, if Lady Fairfax will excuse me, you shall give me your arm—I think, perhaps, I have been out in the evening air long enough."

Lady Fairfax sits watching the retreating forms of Duke Sugden and his aunt in silence for a moment. Then, slowly turning her large eyes upon her sister, she says:

"Violet, are you aware that you are making a little simpleton of yourself?"

"Am I?"

"Yes," replies Iris languidly. "Even more than usual, Violet."

"Thanks, Iris; you are vastly complimentary!"

"Well, what in the world makes you so rude to

Mr. Sugden? and when you are under so deep an obligation to him too!"

"I am not aware that I have been rude to him, Iris," remarks Violet loftily.

"Well, I consider you have. You refused to dance with him just now, and you are not any more tired than I am—really! Then I heard you making some very lame excuses, as I thought, when he was talking about the orchids they have at The Towers—I mean when he invited you to go and see them. Just the same when he and Mabel were talking about her new pony, and asked you to go over and see it. If you don't call such behaviour rude, I do. I wonder Mr. Sugden troubles about you; he must think you are a very ill-mannered child!"

Violet flushes up indignantly at this last thrust.

"I think you err in calling me a 'child', Iris," she says, striving desperately to steady her voice. As to going to The Towers, you seem to have forgotten what I said to you and mother the other day. I think the Sugdens are very nice people, and I—I like them personally. But when I have said a thing, I generally mean it; and though I shall always be pleased when they come here, nothing will induce me to go there."

"Well, I think you show excessive vanity, Violet, in setting up your opinions against everyone else's. I wonder you can lower yourself in this way in the eyes of one whom you evidently looked down upon but a short time since! However, it is no business of mine. I only want to try and save you from making yourself ridiculous in the matter, for what can people think when they see you persistently holding aloof from such close neighbours? and when all the rest of the family are on friendly terms with them."

"I do not care what anyone thinks!" cries Violet passionately, as she rises from her chair. "Mother and Father are satisfied with what I have said to them, and that is sufficient for me. Mother understands what I feel, and you do not. You are absolutely devoid of all sympathy, Iris, and I pity Charley from the bottom of my heart!"

"Oh, I do not think he needs your pity, dear!" retorts her ladyship smiling. But Violet is off and out of sight and hearing, too angry with her sister to trust herself any longer in her presence.

"It is too bad of her!" she cries to herself, as she goes towards the house with swelling heart, and eyes which will keep filling, despite all her

efforts. "She never talks to Cinthy like that, never! and—oh, who is that?"

For someone stands before her, having stepped from the shadow of a clump of trees into a brilliant patch of moonlight.

"Oh, you frightened me so, Mr. Sugden!" and Violet makes a little clutch at her throat, which has an odd, strangled sort of feeling.

"I am so sorry," says Duke, standing still and looking down at the small oval face, which looks unnaturally white in the moonlight. "I am afraid you are tired and nervous; you look as if you had seen a ghost!"

"Do I?" says Violet, smiling feebly.

"Yes; and what is more, I believe you were talking to one as I came up. You were certainly talking to somebody."

"Only myself," answers Violet, beginning to move on.

"But you were speaking with such animation, and I fear I must plead guilty to having heard some of your words, both now and when you were talking to your sister, for I happened to be passing behind your chairs, and could not help hearing a little of your conversation. By the by, where is it, if I may be so bold as to ask, that

you are so determined not to go?" he adds laughing.

Poor Violet blushes furiously, then quickly pales again. But she does not answer the question, and almost at the same moment they come to the garden entrance of the conservatory.

"Let us come in here for a few minutes," he says, holding open the door for her to pass. "A little quiet will be a relief to you after so much of the band. I often think music is rather a fatiguing luxury when one is tired and headachey. There, let us sit down here, and then you can answer my question."

"Question!" repeats Violet vaguely.

"Yes; as to where you do not wish to go."

Again Violet colours up to the roots of her hair, but she sits silent, absently pulling a flower to pieces, and fervently hoping that her companion will start another subject.

He does not do so, however, and after a short silence he turns round smiling and says:

"Well?"

"Oh, it was only something Iris was tormenting me about!" answers the girl, trying to speak lightly. "She always thinks she knows better than anyone else, and loves nothing better than

lecturing. Have you been dancing with Amy Lawrence?" she asks, changing the subject with almost startling abruptness.

"Yes, once or twice." Then suddenly, after a short pause he says: "What a strange girl your friend is! not but what I admire her for her candour."

"Why—what do you mean?"

"Only this. That she has just been making me a formal apology for what she was pleased to call her 'rudeness' on that afternoon when I had the good fortune to save her from 'a watery grave'!—your friend's words again."

"Oh, how could she speak of it?" exclaims Violet, becoming quite agitated. "How could she? She cannot feel very deeply about it, or she never would have done so."

"Oh, but I think you are wronging your friend a little," breaks in Duke gently. "Do you know that it was anxiety on your account that induced her to speak at all on the subject?"

"On my account!" repeats Violet, with surprise.

"Yes. She told me that you are quite on her mind, and that—to use her own words once more—you have been fidgeting yourself 'into fiddle-strings' (I think that was the expression)

about that unlucky conversation. To tell the truth" (Oh, Duke!), "I had forgotten all about it; but I am really distressed to find that the matter has caused either you or Miss Lawrence any pain or—or uncomfortable feeling; and, as I said to your friend just now, I think you should both remember that you could not possibly tell to whom you were talking, and—and, therefore, of course, it was not rudeness on your friend's part to say what she did about—about—, well, to say what she did!" concludes Duke desperately, and hopelessly breaking down in his good-natured efforts to make the best of a bad case; for "Sugden, the soap people" is still ringing in his ears, even as he speaks.

"But I am forgetting what I really wanted to say to you; what, in fact, I introduced the subject for. Will you promise me," and Duke leans forward quite anxiously, "not to worry yourself about this foolish affair any more? I cannot really see that you, personally, are concerned in it at all. But since you seem to think differently, I can only ask you to promise me to forget it—as I shall?"

"I cannot forget it!" says Violet rising. "It would not be possible for me to do so. But—" after a little pause, "I think it is very kind of

you to have forgiven us both, and—I am grateful to you." And without another word Violet leaves him.

Not very long after this, when Duke, leaning against a distant tree, is enjoying a quiet cigarette, he is not a little surprised, and a good deal hurt, to see Violet, struggling round the lawn with Bertie Lawrence, in what is intended for a waltz, but which in reality is some jerky, spasmodic motion which can only be compared to the movements of a grasshopper. Bertie carries his head well down, as if contemplating butting at his partner; and as they drag round the lawn after each other, out of step, out of time, and out of breath as well, it is Violet who steers, and notwithstanding the jerking up and down of her right arm, which seriously interferes with her view of the other dancers—manages to escape many violent collisions. Geoff and Mabel Sugden are one of the other couples, and as they glide round together in perfect time and step, Duke, putting aside his vexation, cannot help smiling at the contrast of the two couples; for Geoff, even while carrying on an animated conversation at the same time, guides his partner through the mazes of the dance with an ease and grace which

would do credit to an experienced dancer. But just as these two are skimming round once more, happy in the belief that all is clear ahead, Bertie is suddenly inspired to take what he calls a "backward step", which is considered "awfully clever, don't you know"; and before either couple is aware of the proximity of the other, they come crash into each other with considerable force.

Although the shock throws Geoff completely off his balance, he manages to swing Mabel clear as he falls heavily to the ground; and Jim Sugden, who is passing at the moment with Lady Fairfax, is in time to steady his sister where she stands, swaying a little from the effects of the concussion.

Poor Violet is not so fortunate; for, to make matters worse, Bertie becomes hopelessly entangled in the tail of Iris's gown, and as he struggles desperately to regain his footing, he deliberately retains his hold of his partner in the dance, ruthlessly dragging her down to the ground with him.

Loud are the exclamations, remonstrances, and condolences, as Duke and several others rush to the rescue of the hapless dancers; and while he and

Charley Fairfax help Violet to rise, Jim Sugden performs the same service for Geoff; who, looking round and rubbing his head rather ruefully, begs to be informed if the stars have returned to their usual position in the heavens. Only Bertie remains seated on the grass where he has fallen, rubbing first his head and then his arm; sulky and cross, and more inclined to blame anyone rather than himself.

"It is so hanged slippewy!" he says sullenly. "One might as well dance on ice as on this beastly gwass."

"Why don't you get up?" demands Duke curtly. "If you had done as Geoff Vereker did with my sister, you very likely would not have fallen yourself. As it is, you have hurt Miss Vereker's injured arm."

"Only a little," says Violet, who is nevertheless holding her left arm with a pained expression on her face.

"If I had been Violet, I should have fallen upon him and given him a good shaking!" exclaims his sister, who has just joined the little throng. "Get up, Bertie, and don't make yourself ridiculous any longer."

"You can keep your advice to yourself, Amy,"

remarks Bertie rudely. But nevertheless he begins to make preparations for rising, and has just got on to his hands and knees, when there is a mighty rush across the lawn, and before anyone has realized what is happening, Cinthy's bull-terrier, Brutus, hurls himself into their midst, and quickly descrying Bertie, who appears to him in a favourable position for a game, promptly pounces on him! In a moment the unhappy youth is knocked down again; Brutus commencing a series of worryings and dartings at his victim, which, though meant in all good part, are anything but agreeable to Bertie.

A burst of laughter on all sides is the first result of this unexpected arrival and attack; but Bertie, his temper already seriously ruffled, is so cross and huffy over it all, that the merriment is quickly checked, and while one or two help him up, and give him an impromptu brush-down with their hands, Cinthy calls her dog off in gruff and severe tones:

"Come here, sir!" she cries, imitating as near as possible the growl with which men invariably call their dogs on occasions of transgression. "How dare you behave so disgracefully? Come here and lie down!"

And Brutus lies down, close to his mistress's feet; and, perhaps as a token of his entire submission, begins to industriously lick off the polish of her shoes.

But, unfortunately, the moment Bertie is up again Brutus is seized with a desire to continue the game, and as the former stoops to recover his hat, which has rolled away a yard or so, the dog breaks away from the detaining hand of his mistress, and darting forward, seizes it in his teeth and scampers round the lawn before anyone can stop him. This is a signal for a game of "catch as catch can", all round, and while Bertie merely stands still, calling out "dash the dog!—my hat will be in wibbons!" the others, one and all, engage in a chase which lasts at least ten minutes, at the end of which Geoff, breathless and panting, places the few last remnants of the hat in the hands of the owner, with a face on which is a curious mixture of regret and mirth; while Charley and Cinthy lead Brutus off to his kennel, a sadder and wiser dog.

CHAPTER XV.

A WHISPERED RUMOUR.

MRS. LAWRENCE is possessed of one idea, and one only, after her return home from the Verekers' garden-party, and that is to call upon the Sugdens with all possible speed. If it were permitted by the laws of society, she would call in the middle of the night rather than leave it over a moment longer.

But as she drives along the dusty road next day towards The Towers, the knowledge that hers is perhaps the best-appointed victoria in the neighbourhood, and that the pair of powerful, glossy chestnuts cost a far larger sum than those bought by Lady Laura Lennox the week before, goes far towards lessening her vexation at the turn things have taken; and by the time she arrives at the door of The Towers, she is all smiles and elegance once more, as she leans forward a little in her anxiety to hear the butler's answer to the usual inquiry.

Mrs. Sugden is "not at home", however, and Miss Sugden is out walking. So it is with a little flutter of disappointment at her heart that

she opens her card case, and selects cards therefrom: one of her own, and two of her husband's. Then the carriage crunches round the drive again to the opposite gate, and Mrs. Lawrence drives back, her society smiles fading a little as she nears home, but still comforting herself with the thought that this tardy reparation will certainly set things right again, and that she can now afford to rest on her oars, and await patiently the Sugdens' return call.

About five o'clock the next afternoon Mrs. Lawrence and her sister, Lady Bradley, are seated at afternoon-tea in the cool, shady drawing-room of The Châlet, the latter having run down for a few hours' chat with her sister. Amy is roaming about the room, sitting nowhere in particular, joining in the conversation when she pleases, but always listening attentively to the confidences of the two elder ladies, which at times afford her immense amusement. Mrs. Lawrence has been telling her sister of the arrival of the Sugdens in the neighbourhood, and how she had been a little uncertain what to do in regard to calling, and so on.

"You see it was so very awkward!" says Mrs. Lawrence plaintively.

"Yes, I daresay you thought so. But you

know, Fanny, I always told you I considered you overdid this sort of thing. Who, and what are these people? They must be well off at any rate to take a place like The Towers."

"Oh, yes! there is no doubt at all of their being really rich. That is the way of course, always, with people who have risen from trade."

"Trade?" echoes Lady Bradley, who hitherto has been giving rather desultory attention to her sister's words; "these people are never the Sugdens of Falcourt, Worcester?"

"Yes, they are. But what of it?"

"Well," cries Lady Bradley, lifting her hands aghast, "you have been doing a nice thing, to be sure! Why, do you know that the eldest girl was presented at court last year? and that Mrs. Sugden is the daughter of a baron? and more than all, that Mr. Sugden was offered a baronetcy some time ago, which, however, he declined. I believe this honour was offered in recognition of the immense good he has done with his wealth in many ways, but more particularly for founding that sea-side home for aged men and women. Dear me, Fanny, why did you not tell me before? Then I might have saved you from making this egregious mistake."

Then, fearing that in her usual blunt fashion of speaking out just what she thinks, she may have hurt her sister's feelings, Lady Bradley tells her all the latest news from town, until Mrs. Lawrence, who has been listening to, and enjoying the little bits of gossip, suddenly holds up her hand and says "Hush!"

Lady Bradley, who, from the solemnity of her sister's manner, expects nothing less than a shock of earthquake, looks apprehensively at her niece, the thin piece of bread and butter she has been persuaded into taking dangling from between her finger and thumb. But Amy quickly reassures her, and by the time she has explained that there is nothing more to alarm her than the sound of carriage wheels in the distance, the carriage itself is driving up to the door.

"Who is it, Amy?" inquires Mrs. Lawrence breathlessly; "is it they?"

"Is it who?" queries her daughter, with a side-long glance at her aunt.

But Mrs. Lawrence has risen to her feet, and stands listening intently.

"What a time Harvey is in answering the bell," she exclaims irritably; "I shall really have to speak seriously to him. Do see, Amy, if—"

At this moment the door opens, and Harvey, salver in hand, enters the room; while a sound of retreating wheels is heard on the gravel outside.

"Cards!" exclaims Mrs. Lawrence, almost starting back in her consternation; "did you not say I was in, Harvey?"

"The servant did not ask, ma'am. He handed in the cards, that was all!" and the man retires with his usual air of deep humility.

"Cards!" says Mrs. Lawrence again, and returning to the tea-table, she sinks into a chair and takes up her smelling-bottle.

"Well, I don't really see what else you could expect!" says Lady Bradley, with the faintest suspicion of a sniff. "However, it is no use crying over spilt milk, you know. Perhaps they will not keep it up; indeed, if they are the kind of people I take them to be, I feel confident they will not!"

"But I am disgraced!" cries Mrs. Lawrence wildly, and showing symptoms of a speedy collapse.

"Oh, nonsense, my dear; nothing of the kind! Here, Amy, give your mother another cup of tea, strong. And now, I want to ask you, Fanny," and Lady Bradley looks persistently away from

her sister and out of the window, "what is this rumour that is getting about in the city? Sir Thomas came home full of it last night, and he mentioned your husband's name as well as others."

"Rumour?" repeats Mrs. Lawrence; "my husband's name?"

"Yes, your husband's," says Lady Bradley, nodding gravely at her sister. "Amy, my dear, would you mind going out and looking for my shawl; I think I left it on the bench under the cedar?"

Amy, who is quick to take a hint from anyone but her mother, gets up and leaves the room; but though she looks for and finds the shawl, she puts it on a hall chair, and returns to the garden, where she sits down on the nearest seat and falls into a brown study. The few words which her aunt has just let drop have seriously alarmed her. For, having naturally a far keener perception than her mother, she has silently noticed and speculated upon her father's altered manner of the past month or so, and more especially the last weeks. How irritable and uncertain-tempered he has become; and how, in some ways, he has been striving to cut down expenses, though to do so in opposition to his wife's wishes is like

pulling against wind and tide, and so much time and energy thrown away. Of late, too, Amy has more than once heard loud and angry words passing between her parents, which she now more than half suspects to have been the result of her father's vain efforts to put a check upon some of her mother's extravagant ideas.

Now, as Amy sits, silent and miserable, thinking over all the events of the past weeks and putting two and two together, she feels certain in her own mind that there is some great trouble hanging over them. And presently, when she hears her mother's voice calling her back to the drawing-room, her fears are almost more than confirmed when her eyes rest upon the two faces before her; her mother's, pale and apprehensive of some unknown trouble to come; her aunt's, a little grim about the mouth, but with a look of anxious affection in her keen gray eyes which softens the expression of the rest of her face.

"I thought you would see your aunt to the station, Amy," says the former, speaking with a visible effort. "I—I am not—feeling very well."

"Yes, yes; Amy will come with me," says Lady Bradley, smiling and trying to appear as lively as usual for her sister's sake. "You can give my

love to Bertram, if he cares to have it!" she continues, drawing on her mantle; "and you can add that I hope he has left off those ridiculously high collars, and that foolish little eye-glass, which he will never get to stay up as long as he lives! Come, Amy."

When, having seen her aunt off comfortably from the station, Amy returns home, she finds that there has been a wire from her father to the effect that he will not be home to dinner, being detained by business.

"So I shall keep quietly upstairs in my room, Amy," says Mrs. Lawrence (and the girl cannot help noticing how her mother's manner and even her voice have altered). "Perhaps I shall have a cup of tea up there," she continues; "so you can order dinner when you like."

"Very well, Mama," says Amy. "And if you are really going to keep upstairs, will you mind my going over to see Violet for a little while after dinner? I feel so dull and—*triste*!"

"Oh, yes, you can do so if you like; but I wish to goodness, Amy, you would leave off using French words so much!" cries her mother crossly. "You drag one into every other sentence that you speak; it is such bad taste: so *outré*, in fact!"

Amy smiles a little to herself on hearing this statement, but seeing that her mother is quite unconscious of what she has said, she merely rings the bell, and orders dinner to be served at once. It does not take her many minutes to eat her solitary dinner; and presently, when the Verekers are all strewn about the lawn, taking their after-dinner tea and coffee, Amy suddenly walks into their midst, and with a little apology for intruding so late, seeks out her special friend.

"Papa did not come home to dinner to-night," she explains further, "and as Mama was not very well and went to her room, and Bertie was out, I felt so horribly dull. I thought you would not mind my coming perhaps."

"Certainly not, my dear!" says Mrs. Vereker kindly; while Geoff promptly vacates his chair and goes in search of another, and Cinthy, behind the tea-tray, says:

"Shall I give you tea or coffee, Amy?" which startles the questioner almost as much as the questioned; it always having been "Miss Lawrence" and "Miss Vereker" between the two girls previous to this.

But there is an air of subdued sadness in the girl's manner this evening, as well as in her face,

that appeals to the hearts of the hitherto lively party; and feeling instinctively that there is evidently something out of tune at Amy's never-too-happy home, they all with one accord exert themselves to cheer her up.

When, however, there is a little move made amongst them all, Amy secures Violet and bears her off to a couple of more distant chairs, where their conversation will not be overheard by anyone.

"Violet!" she cries breathlessly; "I am so miserable and wretched, and that is why I have come here to-night. I felt I must tell somebody. I am sure something is going to happen," and the girl squeezes her friend's hand with a strength which makes her wince.

"Good gracious, Amy!" cries Violet, her mind running upon fires, earthquakes, and burglars, "what do you mean?" And Amy tells her, in a low, constrained voice, of all her fears about her father, and of the few cautious words which she had heard her aunt say to her mother that very afternoon.

But Violet, partly because she cannot of course look at the matter from Amy's point of view, and partly to soothe and make light of her friend's

fears, pooh-poohs the idea of there being anything wrong; until presently Amy begins to feel relieved and even strengthened by this opinion, which, needless to say, is delivered with Violet's usual air of importance and conviction.

Soon after this, Amy reluctantly takes her departure, and escorted by Geoff, Charley Fairfax, Cinthy, and Violet, returns to The Châlet, considerably brighter than when she left it.

CHAPTER XVI.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

A FORTNIGHT has passed since the evening on which Amy Lawrence made the confidences to her friend Violet recorded in the previous chapter.

A fortnight rife with trouble and change to one family in Sunninghurst; trouble which, while not directly affecting any others, had, nevertheless, aroused the curiosity and astonishment of the many, if also the pity and sympathy of the few. In a few words, Mr. Lawrence had failed. In what manner no one seemed exactly to know. But, on the other hand, the catastrophe had not

been any particular surprise to the gentlemen of the surrounding families. For a man who was merely known as being "something in the city" could hardly (they argued) keep up such an extravagant household, or bear such lavish expenditure without there being a screw loose somewhere. Indeed, it soon became evident that Mr. Lawrence —knowing that any investigation of the affairs of the company of which he was director would not bear the light of day—was keeping quietly out of the way until the worst of the scandal should have blown over.

It was at this crisis that substantial proof was given of the sincerity or otherwise of Mrs. Lawrence's real and so-called friends. For those who had formerly been only too glad to accept invitations to balls and dinners at The Châlet now held entirely aloof from her; while the Verekers, who had, perhaps, been on less familiar terms with the Lawrences than anyone in the neighbourhood, had come forward and stood by them in all their misfortunes. Indeed, Mrs. Vereker was constantly at The Châlet, doing her best to console and advise its afflicted mistress, who divided her time between railing at what she called her husband's "mismanagement", and repeated attacks

of violent hysterics; and Violet was no less a comfort to her friend Amy.

The poor girl had behaved so sensibly throughout the whole affair, that Mrs. Vereker could not help wondering if this trouble might not after all prove a blessing in disguise to Amy, rather than a misfortune.

Her first step had been to wire for her elder brother—a sensible, clear-headed, young fellow, who had just obtained his first curacy in London. Much against his mother's will, Leonard had taken the reins of government into his own hands at the Châlet, and, assisted by Amy, had done the little that was still possible to do to retrieve the past.

Bitter had been Mrs. Lawrence's reproaches and wailings when she found that her son—who was nothing if not conscientious—expected her to step out of The Châlet, leaving everything behind her, and take up her abode in some "stuffy little lodging". But she did not stay to think that, but for this eldest son,—who is such a contrast to the petted and pampered Bertie,—she would now be both penniless and homeless.

Matters had so far been satisfactorily arranged, when all at once a great fear had sprung up, only

to become a certainty as the days went on. And poor Leonard, in the midst of all his efforts, was suddenly crushed down by the knowledge that, unless his father could come forward with a certain sum of money by a given date, a warrant for his arrest would immediately be issued. Only the day before this chapter opens, Mr. Vereker had talked long and earnestly with the poor young fellow over this last terrible blow. But there seemed nothing that could be done, for the sum required was a very large one, and altogether beyond the possibility of raising; and Mr. Vereker had at length left him, feeling that words were indeed poor comfort in such a crisis as this.

Breakfast has just come to an end at The Willows on this the next morning, and the father and mother are still lingering at the table, when a loud ring is heard at the front door. In another moment a servant enters with a card.

"Mr. Lawrence is sorry to disturb you, sir," he says; "but would you see him at once?"

Mr. Vereker's reply is to rise immediately, saying as he does so:

"Some fresh trouble, I suppose!"

As her father leaves the room Violet enters it, and seeing the card upon the table, her fears are

also aroused, for she knows of the danger which threatens her friend's father.

"What is it, Mother?" she asks anxiously.

Mrs. Vereker shakes her head.

"Some fresh trouble, I suppose, dear. But I know nothing yet."

In a short time, however, Mr. Vereker suddenly re-enters the room, his face radiant with pleasure.

"I have brought you good news, Mother," he cries. "That noble-hearted man, John Sugden, has come to that poor fellow's rescue! He has offered to advance the sum required, and Leonard is going off by the next up-train, for it seems he has a very good idea of where his father is."

"What a splendid thing to do!" says Mrs. Vereker with enthusiasm; while Violet stands by, listening with rapt attention, an eager light of interest shining in her eyes which she cannot help showing.

"Yes, is it not? It seems that Lawrence did Sugden some slight service years ago, when they were boys at the same school together for a short time. I don't know what it was; only something trivial, I fancy. But Sugden insists that he is under an obligation to Lawrence, and though I think Leonard only half believes it, he could not

do otherwise than accept this timely aid with the gratitude which I am sure he feels. Yes, this is indeed a true case of returning good for evil," continues Mr. Vereker; "for whatever may have happened in the past, the Lawrences have certainly slighted the Sugdens in a most unwarrantable manner since they settled here. And not only has Mr. Sugden proved himself so generous-hearted, but Leonard tells me that Mrs. Sugden also spent a good part of last evening with his mother. On hearing of this graver trouble, and what her husband intended to do, she at once cast all 'feeling' to the winds and went with him. But I must go back to Leonard now. I promised to look out the best train for him," he adds, getting down a "Bradshaw", "for he has to go a cross route. I only looked in to tell you what I knew you would be so glad to hear."

"Yes, indeed," replies Mrs. Vereker. Then, as the door closes on her husband, she turns and looks at Violet.

"I know what you are thinking, Mother," says the girl, flushing painfully. "I knew before this latest proof what good and nice people the Sugdens are. But it does not makes things any better for me. I only wish now that I had list-

ened to you and Papa at first. Now it is too late, of course."

"'It is never too late to mend'," quotes Mrs. Vereker. But Violet is leaving the room, and her mother is not sure if she catches the words or not.

The one great dread having now been thus removed, Leonard sets to work with a will, and in a very few more days has arranged everything as satisfactorily as it is possible to do under the painful circumstances. The only difficulty that presents itself is where to place Mrs. Lawrence, Amy, and Bertie during the time that Leonard is making acquaintance with his vicar, and being installed by him in his new office. For Mrs. Lawrence has begged that nothing may be done in a hurry. "It will not be for long," she laments, with her handkerchief to her eyes, for her "poor, worn-out nerves cannot be expected to stand such a shock as this", and therefore she implores "dear Leonard", not to take "cheap, stuffy, little rooms for the few weeks she will probably occupy them"; and so on. Her sister Louisa's invitation to go up and spend a few weeks with her is hastily and shudderingly declined, and in the end she settles to go down to another married sister, who lives

in a pretty rural village in Surrey, and who is likewise afflicted with "nerves", though not to such a serious extent, perhaps, as Mrs. Lawrence.

This difficulty being disposed of, and Mr. Lawrence having decided to go abroad for a few weeks, where he has undertaken to see after a little piece of business for Mr. Sugden, there remain only Amy and Bertie to be arranged for. But just as it is decided that the latter must perforce go up to town with his brother, to Bertie's ill-concealed disgust, a reprieve comes in the shape of a pressing invitation from his bosom friend, Tom Bowles, to spend the next few weeks with him and "his people": that worthy coming over himself, with a string of bull-terriers, water spaniels, and greyhounds in his wake, to urge the acceptance of the invitation in person. To say that Leonard is glad to have this charge taken off his hands is putting it mildly; for Bertie has an irritating effect upon him which he tries vainly to subdue; and when Mrs. Vereker, who has only just heard that Amy has not been included in her Aunt Lucy's invitation, goes over to The Châlet and insists upon the girl coming to her on an indefinite visit, the young fellow feels that now he stands some chance of completing the

work which still lies before him to do—that of finding a new home for his mother, sister, and brother.

CHAPTER XVII.

A SHOOTING ACCIDENT.

DAYS and weeks have slipped away, and now it is the first of September, and the pop-popping of guns may be heard away in the distance, as eager sportsmen hasten to slaughter the bright-plumaged birds, which are awaiting them in greater numbers than usual.

The weather is still beautifully warm out in the sunshine on this bright first morning of September; although there is a crispness in the air, and a sharp, aromatic odour which a strong north-west wind is blowing over from the not very distant moors.

The leaves, too, are beginning to whisper and rustle with more noise, as the stately old trees toss their graceful arms to and fro in the strong breeze; and if one looks across to the wooded landscape beyond, a faint, golden-brown tint may be detected mingling with the mass of lighter foliage, which, but a week or two ago, stood out,

a study of shaded greens against the darker firs; and it is easy to see that Dame Nature is already beginning to think about donning her russet garb of autumn.

On this particular morning, Violet and Amy Lawrence are seated together, up amongst the straggling branches of the crooked old apple-tree before-mentioned. And to judge by the nature of their talk, it might almost be supposed that the crispness of the air had lent a certain sharpness to their tongues also; for, good friends though they be, there has been a heated argument on that subject, which, as regards Violet, is still a vexed one to everyone else—her foolish and obstinate determination not to enter the Sugdens' house, nor to receive any hospitality from them.

To add to the awkwardness of the situation, it is perfectly plain to everyone but Violet herself that Marmaduke Sugden is seriously hurt by her persistent avoidance of him. It has never occurred to him that it could possibly be their own house which he had overheard her declare she would never enter, and therefore he tells himself that there must be something behind that affair of Amy Lawrence's adventure on the river; that he must have said or done something inadvertently to

hurt the feelings of the girl who has occupied his thoughts rather surprisingly often of late. And he racks his brains to think what it can be—more particularly when he sees her, laughing and merry with his sisters and brother, entering with all the zest in the world into games of golf and tennis with them, and then, when he steps on to the scene, shrinking into her shell, and relapsing into the shy, reserved manner with which she always treats him. It is—as already said—on this vexed point that Violet and her friend have very nearly come to a quarrel this morning. For Amy, always a sensible girl in the main, has softened down and greatly improved in every way since she first came to The Willows, and has tried her hardest to chaff, tease, and worry Violet out of this "fad", as all the younger members of the family call it.

"I call it right-down ill-natured of you, Violet!" cries Amy, giving a little bounce on her branch which seriously endangers the other's equilibrium. "One does not get invited to a shooting luncheon-party every day, and I was looking forward to it tremendously!"

"Well, but you can go, Amy."

"Oh, of course, I mean to go! Because you

choose to go on making a goose of yourself, it is not to say that others should do so.

"Seriously, Vi, why don't you be reasonable? I am sure you are acting against your better self, and, I believe, against your own wishes. You say you like Mrs. Sugden and the girls. Well, what more noble-minded man could you meet with than Mr. Sugden? As for Duke, he is well named, I think, for he would grace the position of any duke in the land! I could almost wish I were you, Violet!"

"Why?"

"Oh, never mind why! I do wish it often now, for many reasons perhaps. It will not be your fate to go out and earn your own living! teaching naughty, hateful children! You will be staying at home, happy and comfortable, and will be presented at Court in due time, and—perhaps in the end, you may marry, and become a—duke-ess!" And Amy looks slyly at her friend out of the corner of one eye.

But the shaft has missed its aim, for Violet, with an expression of deep concern in her eyes, is thinking of Amy's first words about the teaching.

"Don't speak so hopelessly about it, dear!" she says, laying her hand on the other's shoulder

kindly. "You may get amongst some very nice people, and the children may not be hateful at all!"

"Oh, they are sure to be!" cries Amy impatiently. "All children are hateful to those who have the delightful task of teaching them. But *entre nous*, Violet, I don't mean to teach any children—hateful or otherwise. If I did I know I should slap them; and that would lead to unpleasantness all round, so it is far better to give up the idea.

"It was only Leonard's idea, you know," she continues presently. "He thinks it is a respectable sort of thing to do. But for my part I would rather do plain needlework, or—or sweep a crossing, than go out governessing! Governesses are always expected to be in a good temper, and I should invariably be in a bad one! Oh, no! it would never do. Now, Violet, we had better be going in, I think. It will take us a good hour to walk into the woods, and I want lots of time for dressing to-day. I mean to adorn myself for conquest, and set my last new hat at Marmaduke, since you snub him so."

"Amy!"

"Yes; seriously, Violet. Goodness knows when

I shall get another hat, so I ought to make the very most of this. Now, you needn't look dog-in-the-manger-ish, Vi! If you won't talk to Duke Sugden there can be no earthly reason why I should not. Now for a spring! Oh, my gracious! there goes another of my morning frocks!" And Amy, with a rueful expression on her face, gathers up her skirt, in which a wicked-looking forked bough has torn a great rent, and goes away towards the house, leaving Violet to follow at her leisure.

In the hall she meets Charley Fairfax and Geoff.

"Well!" they both inquire in a breath; "what success?"

"She won't come to the luncheon," replies Amy, shaking her head. "Nothing I can say will induce her to! But she has graciously consented to walk to the woods with us, just for the walk you know, and then, she says, she will walk quietly back by herself."

"I'll be jiggered if she shall!" cries Geoff, in a white heat. "I think this nonsense of hers has been allowed to go on quite long enough. Look here, Charley, I vote we get her there somehow, by fair means or foul!"

"All right! I'm with you."

And Charley strolls back into the morning-room with his hands in his pockets, while Amy, glancing up at the clock and finding it later than she thought, darts upstairs to her bedroom.

Half an hour later a merry party is waiting in the hall, ready to set off to this out-door luncheon which the Sugdens are giving on this first day of partridge shooting.

Iris in a bewitching and highly-becoming peach-coloured gown, with a large black velvet hat, has undertaken to chaperon the "young people" as she calls them; the distance being too far for Mrs. Vereker to walk.

"I say, what an awful swell you are to-day, Iris," remarks her young husband. "Is—is there anything tearable about this gown? Oh, thank heaven, it has not got a train! that is something."

"A train at a shooting luncheon!" cries Iris, lifting her eyes in dismay.

"Come, girls, are you ready? Where is Violet? she is coming, isn't she?"

But here Violet herself appears, walking from the neighbourhood of the stables, with Brutus, whom she is holding in leash, and by whom she is being pulled down the path at a rather rapid

rate. A chorus of voices is raised in remonstrance at this startling sight, and everyone begins talking at once.

"You are never going to take that dog?" exclaims Geoff; and Charley whispers:

"By Jove! she has done us after all!"

"You can't take him," cries Iris crossly; "dogs are not allowed in the woods now!"

"Yes, they are," retorts Violet; "if they are in leash, and I have got him in leash."

"He seems to have got you," remarks Charley, turning away with a shrug. "Well, I don't envy you your job of holding him. I bet you anything he will break away from you!"

"Yes; but I say, what does Cinthy think about it? it is her dog." And Geoff, who has started off, turns round again, with a lingering hope that Violet's plan may still be frustrated.

"I have Cinthy's permission to take Brutus," replies his sister with undisturbed dignity. And feeling that there is nothing more to be said, they all start off on their long walk.

There is not very much conversation as they go along. But presently, after some half-hour's walking, voices are heard, within a stone's-throw, and in another moment Nell and Mabel Sugden,

with Duke and several other gentlemen, emerge from behind a thicket, and come forward to greet them.

In the midst of the merry talking and laughing which ensues, Violet stands alone for a minute: longing to get away, but not liking to make the move. "If I had only gone before we came up with them all," she says to herself. "Now it will be so difficult."

Thinking and hesitating still, she is a little startled by a voice at her elbow.

"Isn't it a glorious day for our first slaughter?" says Duke, with a beaming smile. "I am so glad you have come. Nell has chosen a lovely spot for our spread, and the woods are looking just splendid to-day."

Violet looks down and colours painfully. "I am not going to stay, thank you," she says in a low voice.

"Not stay!" cries Duke, scarcely believing his ears.

"I—I have—the dog with me, you see!" explains Violet desperately.

"Oh, but you will never leave us because of that!" cries Duke, brightening up again. "One of the keepers can easily take him home. Let

me take him from you now; you look as if he had tired you out already."

"Thank you," says Violet, her voice sounding constrained even to her own ears; "but I think I had better take him myself. He is rather tiresome with those he does not know."

"Oh, he will be all right with Jennings!" returns Duke quickly. "He is used to dogs, and ours all perfectly adore him. Come, Miss Vereker, let me take him."

But Violet holds tightly on to the leash. "I —I would rather go with him myself," she says, throwing up her chin with an almost defiant air.

Duke looks at her a moment; then with a pained expression on his kind, handsome face says:

"Oh, if you would really rather go, of course I can say no more!" And, lifting his cap, he turns on his heel and leaves her.

Violet instantly seizes the opportunity of making her own escape, but Charley Fairfax, who has seen and taken in the meaning of this small piece of by-play, hastens after her, and lays his hand upon her arm with a firm grasp.

"Not so fast, young lady!" he cries; and there

is a gleam in his usually dreamy eyes which the girl has never seen there before. "You do not mean to tell me you are actually going to leave after what I have just heard."

"What have you heard?" demands Violet almost fiercely.

"Never mind what!" returns Charley authoritatively. "You had better come back before your rudeness is noticed by others. Give me the dog, and come back at once."

"I shall not come back!" retorts Violet hotly. "And I don't see what right you have to order me about, and—let go my wrist, Charley; you are hurting me! There, you have broken my bangle! It is too bad."

"Oh, I daresay it will mend!" says the young fellow, loosing his hold of Violet's wrist. "You are a foolish, vain child, and I have done with you!" And he also turns and leaves her.

Violet makes her way out of the woods this time. But, having reached the outskirts, she sits down on the trunk of a tree to rest, and having commanded Brutus to "lie down", is rather surprised to find that she is crying. The very fact of having made this discovery makes her tears flow faster, until she impatiently dashes

them away, telling herself that she is a weak little fool to cry over such a trivial matter. Is it a trivial matter, though? Her pride and vanity answer "yes", but her better nature says "no"; and in her secret heart she knows that she would give the world to take back those words which had hurt Duke Sugden even more than he had allowed her to see. She knows, too, and even grudgingly allows, that she would give much to be one of that merry party. And when she pictures Amy, bright and sparkling as she can be when she pleases, talking to Duke, and being waited upon by him with that kind thoughtfulness which she has often seen him lavish on others—Amy, who has actually been openly rude to him, but who has had the honesty to confess it! Oh! when she thinks of all this she could scream with vexation, and she feels as if she can never call Amy her "friend" again.

"Well, never mind," she goes on thinking to herself. "It is something at any rate to have some force of character!" And it is with a sort of Spartan courage that she presently dares herself, so to speak, to get up and go back to the scene of merriment, as near as she thinks it safe to venture without fear of being seen, in order to feast her

eyes upon the pleasure which "might have been" for her also.

With this object in view she gets up and shakes herself a little, as does also Brutus, who is tired to death of "lying down", and longing to be on the move once more. Thus Violet is dragged along again, very much at the same pace as when they started from home; and it is only with some difficulty that she can restrain him from going further into the woods than she wishes.

Already she can see the gleam of the white table-cloth shining through the trees, and sometimes a little bright flash of some of the ladies' dresses. And then she creeps a little closer, and, cautiously holding aside some branches, looks through for a moment. Yes; there is Amy, looking bright and handsome, and evidently thoroughly enjoying herself. And Violet cannot help thinking how becoming that curl is, which she is obliged to pull down lower than formerly, to hide the scar on her forehead. And Duke — but stay! is it Duke who suddenly faces round in Violet's direction in order to reach across for something? No, it is Jim, his brother; and looking further down, she sees Mrs. Sugden, happy and radiant in the attentions which her beloved eldest son is

lavishing exclusively upon her. With a little feeling of joy, which she is scarcely conscious of, Violet drops the branch, and with a whispered "Come, Bru," she quickly retraces her steps.

Ere she has gone many yards, however, Cinthy's clear young voice rings out in a merry laugh; and Brutus, who has learned to know and love the sound, stands still, pricks his ears, and before Violet has any idea of his intentions, has dashed forward, wrenching the leash from his captor's hand, and is off and out of sight in a flash. For a moment the girl stands hesitating, uncertain what to do; for of course Brutus must be secured again at any risk. But to go after him, into the very midst of the luncheon-party, when she is supposed to be miles away by this time—oh, that is too much for her pride! Still, she goes forward some paces, with the hope of attracting the dog's attention before he can hurl himself into the midst of the party. Vain hope! For even as she is thinking thus, there is a sudden shout of laughter, and a yelp of joy from Brutus, as he rushes into his young mistress's lap, overturning a bottle of champagne *en route.* A man's voice calls out, "Here! catch the beggar, somebody! he'll be into that bowl of salad next!" while Brutus keeps up a

series of short, excited barks—barks of delight at being once more with his mistress.

All the gentlemen instantly scramble to their feet, with the view of placing their guns beyond reach of the unruly visitor; while Violet, knowing that Brutus will probably be taken charge of now by somebody, begins to ask herself if there is any reason after all that she should show herself, though she still lingers, half fascinated, by the pretty, picturesque scene.

With a little sigh, the girl at length turns from the spot; but before she has taken two steps, the sharp report of a gun rings through the wood, almost deafening her for the moment. Stepping back quickly, fearing she knows not what, Violet hastily thrusts the branches aside again; and even before the white smoke has curled away, she sees Duke Sugden stagger against a tree, white as death. Even in that one glance Violet can tell that the wound is a dangerous one; and knowing, also, that this being the case, not a moment is to be lost, she, with a little hastily-breathed prayer that she may be of use, hurries round to a by-path which will quickly lead her to the scene of the accident. In the few minutes that she takes in reaching it, however, handkerchiefs have been

pulled out of pockets, and Jim and Nell are on their knees beside their brother, bandaging his arm tightly over the coat-sleeve, adding another, and yet another, in their efforts to stem the stream of blood, which, alas! quickly soaks through each one.

As Violet emerges from the little path into the open, a piteous scene meets her eyes; for Nell and Jim, with white, agonized faces, realize that all their efforts are vain; and as the poor distracted mother watches her beloved son's life - blood steadily sinking into the sod, Violet hears her bitter cry:

"Oh, he will bleed to death before help can come!"

In another second a hand is laid on the mother's shoulder, and a voice, steady and clear with purpose, says:

"I know what to do! will you trust him to me?"

One glance at Violet's calm, resolute face bending over her is enough for Mrs. Sugden, and as the girl reads consent in the miserable eyes which are raised to hers she takes the place by Duke's side which Jim and Nell instantly vacate, and kneeling down, rapidly unwinds the handkerchiefs.

"Get others ready!" she commands briefly.

"Cinthy, your scissors!" And Cinthy, with trembling fingers, detaches them from the silver chatelaine she wears.

"And bring me corks—champagne corks, quickly," she says, without looking up, for while she speaks her deft, steady fingers are cutting up the coat-sleeve and then the shirt.

"Now, will you help me?" she says, looking up at Jim, who stands close beside the little group, silent and watchful. "Can you hold the arm,—so?"

Jim follows the directions given him, and then Violet rapidly selects several of the hardest-looking corks from the little heap now lying beside her, and, taking her handkerchief from her pocket, ties them up tightly into a ball.

"Now, have you the bandages ready? Anything will do! a strip off the tablecloth, anything—only quickly!" And for the first time she looks anxiously at the pale, unconscious face of her patient. But in a moment a long strip of the tablecloth is handed to her, and while pressing the ball of cork firmly into the inner part of the arm, below the shoulder and above the wound, she binds it tightly round and round with the bandage, one end of which Jim holds, and then ties the two ends securely

into a knot. Then she watches a moment intently, and satisfied with her work she says, a little less firmly than before:

"Another long strip, please—and will someone get me two sticks? Strong ones; the handle of my sunshade will do. Break it in two, please."

And she glances over to where she had thrown it down on arriving at the scene. In the meantime she has rapidly wound the other bandage round the lower part of the arm, below the wound, tying the ends tightly as before. Then, still watching intently the flow of blood which is getting less and less every moment, she takes the bits of her sunshade-handle from Geoff, who has promptly snapped it across his knee, and stands waiting beside her with the two pieces in his hand. These she inserts just beneath the knots, then twists them round until they refuse to move farther, and with more short strips of damask fixes them in that position. Once, and once only, Duke opens his eyes for a moment, and meeting Violet's fixed upon him with anxious solicitude, a happy light of surprise gleams in them, and his pale lips frame the one word:

"Violet!" before he drifts off again into unconsciousness.

In another second or so the bleeding has entirely stopped, and as Violet makes a movement to rise from her kneeling posture a dozen hands are stretched forward to assist the heroic little maid to her feet. But it is Mr. Sugden—who previous to this had seemed as one turned to stone, who puts his arm round the girl and raises her from the ground, quietly drawing her arm through his afterwards. For now that the strain is over, Violet is trembling from head to foot. Leading her gently away from the little crowd, he seats her on a fallen tree, with her back against another, and laying his hand upon her shoulder he says, brokenly:

"God bless you, my child! If Duke lives, it will be you who have saved him."

Violet cannot speak, but she looks up gratefully, with a little wintry smile in the eyes which are fast filling with tears; and at this moment Charley and Geoff appear together, the former with a bottle of champagne, the latter with a glass.

"There!" cries Charley, filling the glass. "Don't think any more about what I said, but drink this like a good girl."

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"GOD BLESS YOU, MY CHILD! IF DUKE LIVES, YOU WILL HAVE SAVED HIM."

Violet shakes her head and puts aside the glass, struggling meanwhile to control herself.

"I can't!" she says.

"Oh, but you must!" cries Charley, and Geoff says, "Nonsense, Vi! you've got to do as you are told. Come, hurry up, or I shall drink it myself!"

So Violet holds the glass to her trembling lips, and manages to take a sip or two notwithstanding the chattering of her teeth.

"Where are Iris and Cinthy?" she asks presently, after a second attempt.

"Oh, they are both with Amy! She fainted, off-hand, without a moment's loss of time, directly she saw the blood flowing from Duke's arm."

But here Mr. Sugden, who had left the three together for a moment, returns to them.

"My wife is asking for you," he says. "We cannot get her to let anyone take her place for fear of disturbing Duke; so you will come to her, will you not?"

Violet gets up instantly and returns to the spot where Duke lies, still as pale as death, but breathing quietly and naturally, with his head resting in his mother's lap.

Directly Mrs. Sugden sees Violet her eyes fill with tears, and for a moment she is unable to speak. But she draws the girl's face down to a level with her own, and kissing her affectionately, whispers:

"God bless you for this work, dear."

At this moment there is a stir outside the group amongst the gentlemen who are loitering about, and a young fellow with a pleasant, though somewhat stern, resolute face, makes his way through the little throng, straight to the prostrate figure.

"I met Dr. March afore I was half-way to Dr. Moore, sir," whispers Jennings to his master, "and he come along with me at once."

Mr. Sugden nods, and then follows the young surgeon to his son's side.

Dr. March is down on his knees, making his examination, with an odd little expression on his face. But in a minute or two he raises his head.

"Whose work is this?" he asks briefly.

The answer is given by more than one, and as he looks up at Violet, with the admiration which he feels for her skilful bandaging shining in his eyes, he says to Mrs. Sugden:

"She has saved your son's life, madam!"

Then he examines his patient further, irrespective of the wound, and after administering a little more brandy from one of the gentlemen's flasks, rises to his feet.

"It will be better to get him home at once," he says to Mr. Sugden. "Is there a carriage or anything here?"

"But—but," hesitates the father, in blank surprise, "are you—is there nothing to do before he is moved?"

"My dear sir," replies Dr. March, with another admiring look at Violet, "all that it was possible to do at present has already been done. I can do nothing more for your son until we have him home. But of course I will accompany him," he adds kindly.

Then he busies himself in giving directions for Duke's removal, which is rather a difficult matter to arrange, as the waggonette cannot be brought nearer than a certain point. But in less than half an hour the little procession starts on its way homewards: Duke stretched upon a hastily improvised couch in the commodious

carriage, with Mrs. Sugden and Nell opposite; while the rest of the party follow, sad and silent, taking the road in preference to the shorter cut through the woods, in order to see with their own eyes how Duke bears the journey.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FORGOTTEN NOTE.

FOR several days after the accident in the wood there are anxious watchers round Duke's bed. Dr. March had told Mr. Sugden that had it not been for Violet's timely aid his son would probably have bled to death before he could have reached the spot, for the ball had severed one of the main arteries. But although the loss of blood had left the strong young fellow as weak as any infant, the bulletins which one or another of the Verekers go for, several times a day at first, are very fairly favourable, and, unless there should be any relapse, it is hoped that he will soon be out of danger.

And Violet, during this time of anxiety and

suspense, goes about all her little duties with her usual precise regularity; but there is an anxious, wistful look upon her pale face which her mother is quick to notice, and a dreaminess and absence of mind, when not particularly occupied over anything, which is remarked by everybody in turn, though no one draws attention to it.

A great deal of the girl's past foolishness has been forgiven by her family, who feel justly proud of the prompt brave manner in which she had volunteered her assistance in that terrible crisis. And Violet not only notices, but feels devoutly thankful for the determination which they all seem to have come to with one accord; that of burying away out of sight and out of mind that bone of contention which has been such a trouble to them all.

To Iris, however, her sister's preoccupied manner is a source of grave speculation, and she asks herself more than once if there can possibly be any deeper feeling beneath this calm, cold demeanour which she has always worn when in the presence of Duke Sugden.

"There are more impossible things than that,

you know, Charley," she says, nodding gravely at her lord, who as usual is stretched upon the grass at her feet. "And if it is so, it would, of course, account for many things which hitherto have been wholly unaccountable. Oh, yes! I could forgive Violet a great deal of her nonsense in that case," continues Lady Fairfax, who beneath her serene and placid exterior, possesses a spice of romance which no one perhaps would think of crediting her with—unless it be her husband.

Later on in the afternoon there is a good deal of fun, and some chaffing, on the subject of Lady Fairfax's future housekeeping, as the little party draw round the tea-table in the drawing-room. For Charley has just bought a charming little house in Mayfair for his young wife, and before going to Scotland, as they intend doing later, they have decided to go up to London for a few weeks to set their house in order and take formal possession thereof. As Violet seems to be out of sorts, and below par altogether, Iris suggests that she shall accompany herself and Charley.

"It will brighten her up and take her out of

herself," she says to her mother, "and Charley shall take us the round of the theatres. This accident, and Violet's own adventure have had a depressing effect upon her spirits, and it will be just as well for her to go into different scenes for a time. Charley, don't stir your tea so energetically, it's bad form!"

"It's bad form to dictate to your lord and master," returns the young fellow, still stirring with energy, and calmly looking his wife up and down as he does so. "Look here, Iris, I've been thinking deeply, the last few minutes, about the furnishing. I do hope to goodness you have allowed yourself to be guided by the mater about the things you have bought? It seems the fashion in these days to furnish in such a gim-crack manner that it is perfect torture to me to enter some drawing-rooms,—to say nothing of halls,—which people will persist in furnishing extensively when they are not large enough to turn round in. Is there anything reliable to sit on, Iris? And I do hope you haven't crammed up the drawing-room with china and things, because if you have, I give you warning, I shall

never go into it, parties or no parties; so now you know."

Charley's fears being set at rest on these points, they fall to discussing their journey to town, on which Amy is to accompany them; Leonard having written word that he has now secured some really very decent rooms, with which, he thinks, Mrs. Lawrence will even be satisfied.

"And that reminds me," says Lady Fairfax to her mother, "my letter this afternoon was from Mrs. Carey. She tells me she and the maids have got on so well with the house that she should like us to go up the day after to-morrow, instead of the end of the week, if possible. She adds that nearly all the furniture is in now, and the carpets are all down: here, I will read you what she says, Charley."

"Oh, saints forfend!" cries Charley, starting up. "Spare me that, if you love me, Iris! Come, girls; I'm off!"

"And now, Mother," says Iris, when the two are left alone together, "I want to ask you about Violet,—does she care for Duke Sugden, do you think?"

"I have been asking myself the same question, Iris—but Violet is so young!"

"I wish I were as sure about Violet as I am about Duke," continues Lady Fairfax, pursuing the train of her own thoughts. "Anyone can see plainly that he is fond of her, badly though she has treated him!"

"Yes, I suppose you are right, Iris; and yet, until you spoke just now, I had been looking upon her as still a child."

"Violet is no child now, Mother. On the contrary, she is a very determined young woman. Indeed, I fancy we have all had abundant proof of her strong will for the last few months.

"Yes," continues Lady Fairfax, putting her cup down and rising from her chair; "I think in every way it would be an excellent thing for Violet. A good and sensible husband would be the making of her character, for, of course, if she loved him she would allow herself to be ruled by him!" concludes the young wife, with delightful *naïveté*.

While this conversation is going on in the drawing-room of The Willows, Duke Sugden, still

pale and weak, though making good progress, is sitting up to tea for the first time in his bedroom, with Nell presiding at the little tea-table.

Mrs. Sugden has been taken forcible possession of and sent out for a drive in charge of Mabel, and Nell has also banished the nurse downstairs to her own tea, being determined to have Duke all to herself on this afternoon of his first getting up. After the cosy little tea, in regard to which the invalid has behaved well, and allowed himself to be tyrannized over in the matter of good things to Nell's heart's content, she takes up a book which she has been reading to him.

"Now, shall we continue to follow the fortunes of this ill-fated person," she asks, "or—are you sleepy?"

"No, I am not sleepy, Nell; but you can put down the book. I want to—to ask you something."

"Ask away," says Nell, settling herself in her chair and commencing some needlework.

"Has Miss Vereker been to ask after me at all?"

"Do you mean Violet?" asks his sister.

"Yes, Violet," answers Duke quietly.

"Oh, you know, the Verekers have all been kindness itself!" answers Nell evasively. "One or another of them came several times a day when you were at your worst, until you were out of danger, in fact!"

"Yes, I know; but has Violet herself been?"

"Oh, I suppose so!" answers Nell, smoothing out her work with elaborate care. "I believe her card was amongst the others that were left from time to time."

"Hang the cards!" cries Duke crossly. "Any servant could leave them, I suppose. Evidently she has not been, or you would say so," and he looks inquiringly at his sister, who gazes out of the window, neither appearing to notice the query nor the flush of vexation and disappointment on her brother's face.

"Look here, Nell," continues Duke impatiently, "you can do that work some other time, can't you? I want you to listen to me. Do you think Miss Vereker felt—I mean, do you think she was concerned at all about my accident?"

"Why, of course she was!" cries Nell warmly.

"Could she have done what she did, otherwise?"

"Yes, of course she could, and would, too," answers Duke, rapidly losing all patience with poor Nell. "That shows how little you know her. She would have done just the same for Jennings or anyone else probably. Ah, she is a brave girl!"

Nell nods encouragingly, but thinks it better to wait for a more decided lead before speaking.

"Well, this is what I wanted to ask you, Nell. I hear she is going away with the Fairfaxes; and I—should like to see her before she leaves. Do you think—she would come and see me?"

Nell gasps a little.

"Oh, I—I daresay she would, dear! You can but ask her. Only don't be disappointed, Duke, if she doesn't. She is rather a strange girl; reserved, and I think very shy."

"Why should I be disappointed?" he asks with dignity, while poor Nell feels that she has made another false move. "I suppose it is natural I should wish to thank her for saving my life without having any stronger feeling in the matter?"

"Oh, of course, Duke!" And then she looks at

him a little wistfully, and Duke has instant remorse.

"There, don't mind me, Nell, dear! I'm a cross, surly brute. But, oh, Nell, this weakness is so hard to bear! It makes me so peevish and irritable. I wonder you and Mother have any patience with me!"

"Duke, dear Duke!" cries Nell, with her arm round his neck instantly; "as if we cared for anything you say, so long as you make haste and get well. I only felt just a trifle hurt, because—I am not blind, dear, and I would so willingly do anything I could to help you."

"Bring her here then, Nell. I am longing to see her dear little face again, and if she does not come I may not do so for weeks, nay, months. Will you ask her?"

"No; it would be better for you to do that. Why not write a line, and I will undertake to put the note into her own hands."

"You *are* a dear!" cries Duke with enthusiasm. "That is just what I want, Nell; to have the note given to her quietly. Because, if she comes, I would wish it to be of her own free will; and if

not—I do not want to subject her to any displeasure which her family might feel at her refusing to come."

In about another half-hour's time, when the nurse is reinstated in Duke's bedroom, Nell, the bearer of his note, is making her way down the carriage drive of The Willows. It is only a very short simple little note:

Dear Miss Vereker,

I hear you are leaving home for a time. Would it be too much to ask you to come and see your old patient for a few moments before you go away, since he cannot go to you?

Yours sincerely,

MARMADUKE SUGDEN.

But there seems as much difficulty about getting it delivered as if it were some important despatch which had to be safely convoyed through an enemy's country.

To begin with, Miss Violet Vereker is out with Mrs. Vereker and Miss Cinthy. Sir Charles and Lady Fairfax are out driving, and Miss Lawrence and Mr. Geoffrey are out walking.

So Nell stands irresolute, with the little note hidden in her hand. To intrust it to the butler would be to have it delivered into Violet's hands publicly; and this she has been strictly charged to prevent if possible. But in a minute an idea strikes her, and she asks to speak to the maid who waits upon the young ladies.

In another moment a brisk young person appears on the scene, in the whitest of caps and aprons; who, hearing what is required of her, and, possibly scenting a romance, promises with alacrity to give the note into "Miss Violet's own hands, directly as ever she comes in". And Nell, satisfied, retraces her steps.

But it happens to be Mary's "evening out", and her thoughts being entirely taken up with this fact, together with the knowledge that the young man with whom she "walks out", will be waiting for her shortly at the three cross roads, the letter is slipped into her pocket, where it remains, unthought of till late the next day.

It is only when Violet goes up to her room after dinner, to give an eye to the last part of her packing, that Mary, on her knees before a trunk,

the refractory lock of which refuses to catch, suddenly pulls out her handkerchief to assist in turning the key, and with the handkerchief—the unfortunate little note.

"My sakes!" ejaculates Mary with a little gasp, as she stares at the white envelope, with dismay written on her countenance.

"What is it?" inquires Violet, turning round quickly. "Why, that is directed to me!" and she promptly pounces on it and tears it open, while Mary forthwith bursts into a spasmodic and apologetic explanation.

But Violet hears none of it, as she stands at the dressing-table, reading the few lines which the note contains.

"When was this left, Mary?" she asks, without moving.

"Only yesterday, Miss Violet, truthfully. I—I hope it isn't anything very particular; is it, miss?"

"Well, it might have been, Mary. If I had been leaving home to-day instead of to-morrow it would have been of great importance! As it is I hope it may not be too late to make it all right. You may go now, Mary."

And Mary goes, half smiling to herself, notwithstanding her contrition, at her young mistress's air of dignity; while Violet still stands before the looking-glass, reading the little note again and again; her mind a perfect chaos of conflicting feelings. First and foremost is a very decided feeling of joy, that Duke Sugden should wish to see her. But at the same time—and while thinking thus, she ruthlessly stifles the desire to go, which she knows exists at the bottom of her heart—she tells herself that Mary has done her a real service in forgetting to deliver the note; for she could not have brought herself to comply with the request it contains, and—now she can say with truth that it is not in her power to do so; whereas yesterday—she would not have had the same excuse.

With a little flush of excitement on her usually pale face, she moves away from the dressing-table, and getting out her writing case, sits down before it, thinking deeply. Presently, after staring vaguely at the paper for some minutes, she dashes her pen into the ink, and begins to write rapidly, and although several sheets are spoiled, in her

vain efforts to be perfectly honest with herself, as well as strictly truthful, the following note presently lies before her.

The Willows,
Wednesday Night.

Dear Mr. Sugden,

Through some little mistake, your note has only just been given to me. I am very glad to hear that you are well enough to sit up again now, but as my sister's plans have been altered, and we leave for London early to-morrow morning, I am sorry that it is impossible for me to go and see you. Trusting that you will soon be quite strong again.

Believe me,

Yours sincerely,

VIOLET M. VEREKER.

"I am a little mean humbug!" says the girl, leaning back in her chair and regarding these lines meditatively. "He will, of course, think that had there been time I should have gone; whereas I should certainly not have gone. But I can't bear to think of his being disappointed—" And here Violet pulls herself up, blushing

furiously at her conceit in thinking for an instant that he will be disappointed. Almost before anyone is astir the next morning Violet is up and out, looking critically amongst her carefully tended plants for something sweet-smelling, yet simple. After some search she finds there is still quite a little show of late yellow roses, and hastily clipping off half a dozen or so, with one or two only half-opened buds, she returns to the house and lays them beside the note upon a little table in her bedroom.

There are a hundred little things to see to still in regard to her journey before she goes down stairs to breakfast; and while she quickly moves about, attending to them, the roses are lifted away from the note and back again half a dozen times! But presently there comes a knock at the door, and even as the maid enters, they are placed beside the note once more, with a little air of resolution, though with a half-sigh of resignation also, as Violet realizes that she can scarcely change her mind again, now that Mary is in the room.

Without leaving herself time to think about it one way or the other, therefore, she takes note and

flowers up together, and twisting some white paper round the latter, gives them into the maid's hands.

"Mary," she says, "I want you to leave these at The Towers, at once. There is no answer." And Violet turns away quickly; while Mary, anxious to make up for her previous neglect, hastens away to obey her young mistress's behest without loss of time.

And Marmaduke, some little time later, lies reading the carefully worded little note, with the roses on the bed close beside him. And as he reads, the first expression of disappointment which had crossed his face, fades away into a little smile, as he asks himself, "Would she have come had there been time?"

CHAPTER XIX.

"THERE SHE TRIPPED AND THERE SHE FELL!"

SEPTEMBER has slipped into October, and October into November, before there is any decided talk of Violet coming home again. Not

but what the party at The Willows is kept thoroughly *au courant* of all the movements of the little family in Mayfair, by means of lengthy epistles from Violet herself, and sometimes briefer letters from Iris, who finds plenty to do in directing her little household. One morning the whole family is electrified by a letter from Charley, than whom a more confirmed letter-writing hater could not be found.

The letter is to Cinthy, and consists of two whole sheets, closely filled, with a little bit over written at the top, this evidently having been some after-thought; and it complains that the writer has a beastly cold, and that some frumping old doctor has forbidden his going outside the door that day. And so, as Iris and Violet are out buying bonnets or something, and he cannot think of anything better to do, he thinks he may as well write and tell Cinthy all the news; which he does, in a short, abrupt manner peculiar to himself.

And Cinthy keeps the Mayfairites posted up in all the news likewise; that is, the little there is at Sunninghurst, which has now settled down

into that quietness and monotony with which it generally faces the coming winter.

In one of these letters from Cinthy, which Violet, kneeling beside a glowing fire, reads out to her sister, there is the news that Marmaduke Sugden is now quite convalescent, and that on the morrow he, with his mother and eldest sister, is to go to St. Leonards for a week or two. Iris, watching Violet narrowly as she reads, is not sure whether the flush upon her sister's face is caused by the ruddy firelight or the few words which she has just read. But when the letter is folded and put away the girl still sits, dreamily gazing into the fire, with her hands, loosely clasped, lying in her lap; and presently, when Iris speaks suddenly, she gives such a perceptible start that her sister cannot help smiling to herself.

Violet, in answering this letter, states briefly that she is "glad Mr. Sugden has got on so well!" —and then she darts off at a tangent, with news of the Lawrences, with whom she had been spending the previous day. Mr. Lawrence, she tells them, is going abroad—to America, she thinks. Mrs. Lawrence, she goes on to say, shows no im-

mediate signs of departing from this life, but is consoling herself for all her lost splendour with little dainty teas; to which are asked the vicar's wife, and sundry other ladies who take an active interest in all the affairs of St. Michael's, the church at which her son is now fully established as curate. Amy, also, seems happier, and although she is still quite determined to have nothing to do with any "hateful, naughty children", she has not yet offered herself as assistant to any gentleman in the crossing-sweeping profession. Only Bertie —poor, unhappy Bertie, with whom smart patent-leather boots, and delicately-hued light overcoats are things of the past—is unable to emerge from the slough of despond into which his father's reverses have cast him!

"It is dashed uncomfortable, I can tell you, sitting up on a high stool witing all day!" he remarks plaintively to Violet one day. "And I'm so near-sighted, don't you know, that I've been obliged to take to these beastly things," pointing scornfully to a pair of spectacles which are on the table beside him. "My eye-glass kept tumbling down on the desk with a clatter, and

that annoyed Mr. Parkins, our head clerk, don't you know, till one day he looked over his own goggles at me and said: 'Lawence, can't you keep that confounded glass in your eye? Because, if not, I wish to goodness you would get another that you can!' So of course I had to," concludes Bertie with a sigh.

Mr. Vereker dines and sleeps at the little house in Mayfair several times during Violet's visit there, and each account which he takes home afterwards of his younger daughter's health and spirits is an improvement upon the last.

"She is as gay as a lark again now, my dear," he says to his wife; "and when we have her home again I expect we shall hear nothing more of this nonsense about the Sugdens."

Which proves to be an utterly incorrect surmise on Mr. Vereker's part, however. For when Violet, a week or so later, is seated in the train on her way home, she is telling herself that she need no longer feel that awkwardness of being under a deep obligation to Marmaduke Sugden; he being, if anything, under a deeper one to her now, so that they are "quits", so to speak. Therefore,

she feels that she can now meet him on perfectly equal terms, and certainly without making any concession in the matter of visiting at The Towers.

In this frame of mind she arrives at the station, about four o'clock in the afternoon; and just as the carriage with herself and Cinthy inside is driving out of the station yard, Duke, in the high dogcart, to which is harnessed his "fast mare", turns into it; for he is driving his Aunt Eliza back to the station in time to catch the next up-train. Violet thinks this a fitting opportunity to air a little of the dignity with which she means to comport herself in future, and gives Duke such a slight and frigid bow in passing that in his astonishment he allows his near wheel to scrape against a neighbouring lamp-post, the slight collision causing Vixen to dance a little, while poor Aunt Eliza's heart nearly jumps into her throat.

And so the time goes on, until it only wants a little more than a fortnight to Christmas, and real wintry weather has set in, with heavy snow-showers first, and then a sharp frost, which makes travelling the reverse of easy.

Violet and Cinthy are sitting together beside the drawing-room fire, talking over their plans for the next few weeks. For Iris and Charley are to spend Christmas with them, arriving a few days before; and they have determined to have a rare, jolly time of it—if only the frost lasts,—sleighing, skating, both by daylight and torchlight, and private theatricals, tableaux, and what not! Last, but not least, they mean to insist on their parents giving a New-Year's-eve dance.

"Which will be a sort of preliminary affair to my proper 'coming out'," says Violet, laughing. Presently the girl gets up and shakes herself.

"I am getting sleepy and stupid over this fire," she says, going over to the window and looking out. "I think I shall go out and have a good, brisk walk. Will you come, Cinthy?"

"No," replies that young lady promptly. "I would rather sit by the fire."

"You will burn up all your brains if you sit over it in that fashion!" says Violet, laughing. "It would do you much more good to go out."

"Well, I am not going!" retorts Cinthy, throwing herself back in her chair and clasping her

hands at the back of her head. "If I leave this chair at all — and it will only be under protest—it will be with the intention of finishing Charley's bust. I want to get it really nicely finished off before they come, and I am a little doubtful about the eyes: I think they stick out too—too, oh! what's the word, Violet; oh yes! too prominently. We had an argument about the collar, Charley and I. He wanted a Byronic collar, and I said it would look simply ridiculous with his style of face. Of course Charley argued that a Byronic collar was bound to look well on anything in the shape of statuary! What! are you really going out, Vi?"

"Yes; I want waking up. Good-bye, my dear!"

And Cinthy is left to her own reflections, while Violet, in a tight-fitting cloth jacket, edged with fur, and a neat little hat to match, starts off on her walk alone.

"It's awfully slippery! you're sure to fall down!" cries Cinthy's voice out of the front door. And having sent this comforting assurance after her sister, she bangs it to again, and bounds up the stairs to her atelier.

When once Violet has got over the first nipping sharpness of the keen, frosty air, she thoroughly enjoys her walk. Leaving the village behind her, she skirts round the woods, even going a little beyond, on to the first piece of the moors, where she meets a wind that blows a healthy, fresh colour into her face. It takes some little time to make this round, however, and to her surprise she suddenly finds that it is beginning to get dark. So she takes a shorter way back, and steps out as briskly as she dare, for now that the light is waning, it is difficult to see the safest part of the beaten track, which shines like glass before her. Presently she emerges into the open road again, and here she gets on better—so well, indeed, that she forgets to be cautious, and goes along at a brisk, swinging pace.

Soon she comes in sight of The Towers' gates, and almost at the same moment the sharp, quick trot of horses' hoofs rings out behind her. Being naturally timid in regard to horses, she shrinks to one side of the road, a prey to all sorts of nameless fears. "What if the driver should not see her, in the anxiety of holding his horses

well in hand on the slippery road? or suppose the horses should shy at the long, black shadow which her figure throws across the road? or what if they should slip—" But at this point the carriage comes sweeping round a corner; and Violet, throwing a frightened look over her shoulder, puts her foot upon a slide, reels backwards, and after one wild attempt to steady herself falls down in a heap on the glittering road. At the same moment the carriage, which is open, swerves to the opposite side of the road, the horses plunging a little at the sudden movement, and the occupants are startled into the knowledge that something has happened.

"What is it, Brookes?" inquires Mrs. Sugden's voice. "Is anything wrong with the horses?"

But James, the footman, has already got down from the box, and in another moment he comes up to Duke, who is leaning out of the carriage.

"It's a young lady slipped down, sir; and I think it's Miss Vereker."

"Good heavens!" And Duke has leapt from the carriage, and is kneeling beside the forlorn

little figure almost before the words have left James's lips.

"Good gracious, Nell; it must be Violet!" cries Mrs. Sugden excitedly to the third occupant of the carriage. "Let us get out and see."

"Get one of the lamps," commands Duke's clear voice. "I believe she has fainted."

"No, no, I have not!" cries Violet in a small, weak voice. "Please do not trouble about me; I shall be all right in a moment. O—h!" The cry of agony is caused by an effort which she makes to rise, and in a faint voice she adds:

"I—I think my ankle is broken!" as she sinks down again with a little moan.

"Oh, my poor child!" cries Mrs. Sugden, kneeling down beside Violet also. "Lean against me, dear."

But Violet is already leaning against Duke, with pale face and closed eyes—against that same arm which she had tended with such anxious care but a few months ago; and Duke tells his mother rather peremptorily to get up again.

"You will catch cold, Mother! Make her get up, Nell. Now, what had we better do?"

"We must get her into the carriage, and drive her home, of course. Do you really think it is broken, my dear?"

"I am afraid so," answers Violet in a whisper. "Besides the dreadful pain, it feels—no use."

"Well, we will help you up, dear; then we shall be better able to tell. Nell, you are stronger than I; perhaps you can take her other arm?"

"I do not want any help," says Duke, who is already gently raising the girl.

But the mere fact of letting the foot hang wrings such a cry of agony from Violet as to startle all her hearers, and as Mrs. Sugden hastens forward the girl falls back in a dead faint, leaning against Duke in good earnest.

"It will be better to carry her straight into the house, Duke," hurriedly whispers his mother. "Nell and I will follow quickly."

But though they both hurry after the vanishing form in front of them, Duke reaches the wide portico a good three minutes before his mother and sister; and making straight for the drawing-room, he lays Violet gently down upon a sofa.

There he stands, looking down upon the pale, little face which has grown so dear to him, and smoothing back, with a light, lingering touch, the bright chestnut hair from the white forehead. Then, as Mrs. Sugden and Nell hasten into the room, he draws back, saying:

"I will leave her with you, Mother, now. She is beginning to come round, I think, and"—with a little sigh—"I had best be absent."

But something in her son's manner arrests the mother's attention, and seeing by a glance that Nell is already busying herself over Violet, she follows Duke, and laying her two hands upon his shoulders, says:

"My son, do you love Violet?"

Duke's answer is to stoop and kiss the sweet face raised to his. Then he turns and leaves the room.

At the same moment Mrs. Bloxom, the housekeeper, having heard the news of the accident, hastily enters, armed with smelling-salts, toilet vinegar, and sal-volatile. And between the three, who all vie with one another in bathing her forehead, chafing her hands, and holding salts under

her nostrils, Violet soon comes to herself, and in the usual form adopted by fainting heroines in real life as well as in fiction, requests to be informed "where she is?"

But here Mrs. Sugden is seized with a happy idea, and disregarding the patient's question, says:

"I believe Dr. Moore may still be in the house; he was to see your grandfather about five, you know, Nell. Run, Bloxom, will you, and see if you can find Mr. Duke? He will soon inquire!"

Mr. Duke does not require much "finding"; he being, in fact, just on the other side of the door. And on hearing what is required of him, he bounds up the stairs, four at a time, running full tilt against the doctor, who has just emerged from old Mr. Peter Sugden's sitting-room.

Seizing the good gentleman's arm, Duke hurriedly tells him of the accident and its result, running him downstairs at such a pace meanwhile that he is forced to make a clutch at the bannisters and remonstrate.

"Steady! steady, my lad! Why, bless my

soul, Duke, do you want to break the neck of your best friend?"

In another few minutes, Dr. Moore, having examined the ankle,—the tendons of which he finds to be badly strained, while the whole foot is terribly swollen,—is sitting beside the sofa talking to Violet, and trying to bring her to reason regarding the expediency of an indefinite stay at The Towers, which Mrs. Sugden is most genuinely anxious she should make, and Violet is as anxious not to make.

"My dear," says Dr. Moore, looking wonderingly at his patient, who is now sitting up with flushed cheeks and eyes that sparkle with suppressed excitement; "you cannot move home to-night; why, it may be days or even weeks before you can put your foot to the ground!"

"Well, that is the very reason!" cries Violet argumentatively. "I cannot possibly allow myself to be a burden on Mrs. Sugden!"

"A burden!" repeats Mrs. Sugden reproachfully. "Oh, Violet, you forget, my dear!"

The girl blushes and looks a little ashamed of her ungracious speech. And Mrs. Sugden seeing

this, comes round and kisses her. She leaves the room soon after, and then Violet turns round and grasps the doctor's arm.

"Oh, Dr. Moore!" she cries—and there are actually tears in her eyes; "do, please, let me go home. I am sure the move would not hurt me!"

"But I am equally sure that it would," answers the doctor shortly. "Besides, it really does not rest so much with either myself or you—no, certainly not you,—but your father, my dear."

And so Violet is forced to submit, which she does with rather a sorry grace. For Mr. Vereker, apart from the regret which he, of course, feels for the accident itself, makes no secret of his delight at its consequences.

"To think, my dear," he says to his wife, when, together they are on their way home, after visiting Violet at The Towers; "that little Violet's alternative should really have come to pass! Do not you remember that morning in the summer-house, when her ladyship walked off with her head in the air, declaring that she would 'never enter the Sugdens' doors unless carried in by force'?"

"Yes; so she did! I remember now. Well, Robert, since it has been taken out of her own hands like this, I really hope and even think that the poor child may now at last see how foolish she has been. She will have ample time and opportunity to think it all out now."

By and by, while the family are dressing for dinner, Violet is left alone for a time, and at liberty to go to sleep if she wishes; the lamps being lowered with a view to this possibility.

But Violet does not go to sleep. Instead, she lies thinking, thinking, until presently two big tears which are quivering on her eyelashes, roll down her cheeks and on to her hands.

"Well, it is all settled and done with now!" she tells herself. She had said that she would not enter The Towers unless carried in by force! But fate has been too strong for her; and she has been carried in, not by force certainly, but when in an unconscious state, and powerless to prevent it. And, as little by little, she realizes how small and insignificant a thing her own will has been in this matter, a feeling of restfulness, and even thankfulness that her foolish vanity has been

thus mercifully and wisely dealt with, takes possession of her, mingled with a sense of deep shame that she should ever by word or by deed have hurt the feelings of this family, in whom she has at last learned to hear the "ring of true metal".

And Duke, who has heard somehow or other of Violet's great wish not to remain at The Towers, but to be taken home, stands musing before the glass, as he slowly dresses for dinner, asking himself: "Can it possibly be here that Violet was so determined not to come?—and if so, am I the cause of that determination? Oh, if so, I would rather, a thousand times, have carried her the whole of the distance to her own home than have brought her here by force, as it were! Well, if it should turn out thus, there is still one course left open to me to pursue: I can leave home during the time that Violet is a guest here!"

To a proud, honourable nature such as Duke's this seems literally the only thing to do.

"But I will do nothing rashly," he tells himself; "I will make it my business to find out

the real truth of the matter—without wounding her feelings in any way,—before banishing myself from my home." And with a view to putting his plan into practice without loss of time, he goes down and opens the drawing-room door softly.

But Violet hears it open, and turns her head.

"You are not asleep?" he asks, coming into the room. "I may come in?"

"Yes, of course!" And Violet for about the first time in their acquaintance, smiles brightly at him.

"And you are really feeling better now?" he asks, sitting down beside her. "You look ten per cent better than when I carried you in an hour or so ago!"

"Did *you* carry me in?" asks the girl quickly.

"Yes, of course. Did you think my mother helped?"

Violet muses a moment: for she has some vague recollection of that light, caressing touch on her forehead, and—at anyrate it could not have been either Mrs. Sugden or Nell!

"But you have not answered my question," continues Duke. "Do you really feel better?"

"Oh, yes! ever so much, thank you. You

are all so good to me, and have made me so welcome. Only—I cannot bear to be such a trouble to you all."

"A trouble! Oh, Violet!" The name slips out under his breath; but Violet hears it, although she pretends to be busily engaged in stroking the fur of the light rug which they have thrown over the sofa.

"Miss Vereker," he continues, leaning forward a little, "I want to ask you something. You need not let it distress you in the very least, and you can answer in one word—'Yes' or 'No'. Am I right in thinking that it was this house that you were so determined not to enter—that day at the garden-party, you remember?"

Violet is silent, but a great wave of colour rises up and dyes her face scarlet with shame.

"You need not answer," says Duke kindly; "your silence tells me that I am right. One more question: am I connected in any way with this determination? Have I unwittingly said or done anything to hurt or vex you in the past?"

"Oh, no, no; a thousand times no!" cries Violet, completely carried out of her usual reserve

by the force of feeling which Duke's generous words have aroused. "It is I who have said and done things of which I am now heartily ashamed! It was all my abominable pride, and—and conceit! And you have been so good and kind to me in so many ways,—you and your mother and sisters," she adds hastily, "that I could not bear to face you, excepting when I was compelled to. Oh, I do not deserve all this kindness! It would have served me right if you had left me lying in the road there, where I fell." And Violet winds up this genuine outburst of feeling with an hysterical sound in her throat; something between a laugh and a sob.

The sound alarms Duke a little, who has all a man's horror of anything in the nature of hysterics. But he sees with relief that Violet has already controlled herself, and sets himself to soothe her agitation with his usual tact and gentleness.

"Oh, hush, Miss Vereker!" he says, taking her hand and stroking it, much as he might a child's. "It distresses me to hear you talk like that. You must surely forget all that you did for me not so very long ago. And that reminds

me: do you know that, until this moment, you have never given me an opportunity of thanking you for saving my life that day?"

"Oh, don't thank me; pray, don't thank me!" cries Violet wildly. "Be thankful instead to God that I was still there to save you!" And this time Violet has a hard struggle to maintain her composure, and for a moment her whole frame is shaken by the silent sobs which she is determined to strangle at any risk.

Duke's next words astonish himself as much as Violet perhaps, for until this moment he had not the slightest intention of saying anything of the kind; but the girl's agitation causes him to throw caution to the winds, and leaning forward, he says, in a low, suppressed voice:

"Violet, dear Violet, I loved you long before that day; and ten times more dearly since! Will you take the life that you have saved? will you try and learn to love me in return, dear Violet? will you—"

But here Violet interrupts him with almost a cry of anguish, and burying her face in her hands, cries:

"Oh, no, no; anything but that! Oh, do not ask me, Mr. Sugden; I cannot, I cannot! Oh, will you please leave me?"

"Hush, hush!" says Duke, rising from his chair. "Do not distress yourself so! I am sorry I have spoken, for it is only as I have feared! Forget what I have said—and—God bless you, Violet!" And once more he lays his hand caressingly upon the bowed head.

When Violet looks up again she is alone in the room, and, realizing this fact, together with the knowledge that she would give the whole world to call Duke back, she buries her face in the sofa cushions in a very storm of sobs and tears, which shake her slight frame from head to foot.

CHAPTER XX.

AUF WIEDERSEH'N.

THE next few days are a curious mixture of pleasure and pain to Violet; and perhaps, in a way, to Duke also, though a far fuller share of the latter falls to his portion. Mrs. Sugden,

with a mother's instinct, had quickly seen that there was something amiss with her son, and after dinner that evening she had drawn Duke into the boudoir with her, and there, sitting close together, hand in hand, she had heard the little story which he was only half willing to tell.

But Mrs. Sugden does not take the same gloomy view of affairs as her son does, and she tells him that he must not expect too much of Violet yet.

"I am sure that she has very deep feelings, Duke; feelings that have been severely taxed lately, and particularly to-night; and—I am equally sure that she cares for you."

But Duke shakes his head, refusing to be comforted on this score; although he feels a shade less miserable than he did before he entered the room.

"You say," continues Mrs. Sugden, "that you are going now to speak to her father? That is the very best thing you can do, Duke; and you will find—I am sure of it—that he will take just the same view of the case as I do."

Which proves to be true. And as Duke leaves

The Willows he tells himself that he has been an idiot, that he has frightened poor little Violet! And although he will not allow, even to himself, that Violet has any feeling at all for him beyond that of a friend at present, a hope springs up in his heart that by and by, perhaps, that feeling may ripen into affection.

Altogether, Duke looks a trifle more cheerful when he reaches home again, and having altered his determination to avoid the drawing-room for the remainder of the evening—for, after all, he thinks it will put Violet much more at her ease if he meets and speaks to her just as usual,—he enters the room without any hesitation, greatly to his mother's relief.

In order to save Violet the journey down and up the stairs each day, it is arranged that she shall be established in Mrs. Sugden's boudoir, whence she can be easily carried down the long corridor, at the end of which is her bedroom. But she is not allowed to be dull there: one or another of the girls always coming up to take breakfast, luncheon, or dinner with her, as the case may be; while it comes to be quite an

established thing that the five o'clock tea is carried up there; everyone who is at home finding his or her way to the boudoir as it approaches five. Even Duke will come in for a cup of tea sometimes, and will sit down by the sofa: inquiring after the sprained ankle, which is making good progress, and talking over the books and magazines which some kind and thoughtful person has strewn the table with for her amusement. But he is always the first to make a move, and Violet, with some of her old perversity still clinging to her, is half relieved, half sorry, and sometimes wholly angry when she hears the door close upon him.

There is a small excitement for each one of these two, which takes place regularly every morning at a quarter to nine, and every evening about ten; and which is looked forward to by each—though neither would allow it for worlds—with an ill-concealed pleasure that amuses all the lookers-on not a little! This is nothing less than the ceremony, performed by Duke alone with reckless regularity, of carrying Violet from her bedroom to the sitting-room and back again!

On the first morning after the accident, Nell had entered the room after a hurried knock, and finding that, with the assistance of her own maid, who has been deputed to wait upon the young visitor exclusively, Violet is now fully dressed, she quickly kissed her, saying:

"That is right! Duke is waiting in the corridor to take you into the boudoir!"

And from that time, as already said, it had been an understood thing that Duke, and Duke alone, should perform that office for the visitor.

Once when Nell—who has been dubbed "the duenna" by the rest of the family—is called away for a moment by her mother, Violet says, in almost a whisper:

"How easily and nicely you carry me!"

And Duke looks up for one moment into the clear gray eyes, and (for the temptation of the moment is great) turns his head and kisses the hand which rests upon his shoulder.

But Violet says:

"Oh, don't!"

And Duke says:

"Forgive me, Violet!"

And neither speaks again until Nell returns, and an elaborate conversation on the weather is started.

But the next morning a direful thing happens; and Violet, seated ready dressed and waiting, as usual, to be taken into the boudoir, is surprised and disappointed to see following Nell into the room, not Duke, but—Jim!

Of course Violet says "Good-morning" to Jim, with a good deal more effusion and warmth than she has been in the habit of bestowing upon his brother. But Nell detects a slight tremble in her voice, and standing by while Jim places his burden on the sofa, she waits until he has gone, and then says:

"Let me see if I can settle you more comfortably, Violet. Jim does not manage you so well as Duke; does he?"

"No," says Violet smiling; "and he scraped my arm against the door—only, pray, don't say so!"

Then, plucking up her courage, she asks:

"Is your brother not well this morning, Nell?"

Nell does not say what quickly comes into her

mind—that Jim is just as much "her brother" as Duke is—but answers at once, kindly:

"Yes, he is quite well, Violet. But he has gone on a little visit of a few days to a friend. I—I don't think he will be away for long. And he bade me tell you this, and to say 'Good-bye' to you for him, and to give you these flowers."

And Nell lays a bunch of lovely hot-house flowers in Violet's lap, and, giving her a kiss, leaves the room; while Violet turns her head and gazes out of the window at the landscape—which has all at once grown so gloomy—with eyes full of tears.

"He might have come to say 'Good-bye' to me," she says to herself bitterly; "or at least have told me he was going!" And then she takes up the flowers and sniffs absently at them, until suddenly she lays them down and bursts into a passion of tears. But this relieves her overstrung nerves, and as her sobs presently become quieter and less frequent, she begins to scold herself roundly for her "foolishness". Taking up the flowers once more, her attention is attracted by a little piece of paper, stuck in

the centre of the bunch; and hastily pulling out and unfolding it, she reads two words—"*Auf Wiederseh'n!*"

Ah! how bright the world has grown again! And how the winter sun streams in at the window once more! Even the flowers smell sweeter than they did a moment ago, and as Violet's heart swells with thankfulness that she has not been forgotten, she sheds a few more tears—happy ones this time,—and hastily folding the little piece of paper, hides it away out of sight.

At this moment Mrs. Sugden enters the room —before Violet can do away with the traces of her tears.

"Not fretting, dear?" she asks, sitting down beside her.

"No, not now!" answers Violet, smiling brightly back at her kind hostess. "Look, what lovely flowers Du—Mr. Sugden has sent me!"

"Yes, how lovely!" says Mrs. Sugden, carefully disregarding the slip, but feeling well pleased nevertheless. "You will miss Duke a little, I am afraid? We all do: there seems quite a blank in the house when he goes away. However, it will

not be for long, I hope. And now, Violet, I have come chiefly to consult you about something which is troubling me a little." And then she tells her that on the very day of Violet's accident, she and Nell had been sending out invitations for a dance, which was fixed to take place on the twenty-third.

"For," Mrs. Sugden continues, "we felt that if we once let Christmas pass, everyone would be full of engagements, and we want to have acceptances, not refusals of our invitations. Now, the point is, dear, whether or not we shall postpone our dance?"

"Oh, no, pray, let it be as you have settled!" replies the girl at once. "It would distress me dreadfully if you altered your plans just because of me! If you do not mind having me still, I shall enjoy it myself; because I daresay you would try and let me see something of it, though"—with a little *moue*—"I suppose I should scarcely be able to dance."

"Not quite, my dear!" says Mrs. Sugden laughing. "But you are getting on so well now, Violet, that Dr. Moore said if you were very

careful, he thinks you may try your foot soon: 'with a stick and an arm', he said."

"Oh, I am so glad!" cries Violet gaily. "I shall make him let me try to-day, and to-morrow perhaps I may get as far as walking to and from my room!"

"Ah, but you must be very, very careful at first," says Mrs. Sugden, rising as she speaks, "or you might have to lie up again for weeks. Very well, then; we are to leave the date as already fixed?"

"Oh, yes, please!" answers Violet brightly.

"And I may consider that you have accepted my invitation to you, which went with your mother's and father's and Cinthy's?"

"Oh, yes, indeed!" cries the girl, blushing furiously. "And, oh, dear Mrs. Sugden, do forgive me for all my past rudeness and—and unkindness! I cannot bear to think of it now!"

"My dear, there is nothing to forgive. I am only so glad you are at last making yourself happy here. And—when you gave me back my son's life that day, Violet, you made ample atonement for any little pain which you might have caused

me to feel before. But now I beg you to forget it all, dear, as I have long ago. I am going to fetch Grandfather, now. Do you know his little visits to you every morning have quite pleased him. He has taken a great fancy to you, and says that you read aloud exceptionally well, for he can hear every word that you say. That is a great compliment, you know, Violet, because sometimes Grandfather is very deaf. Well, I must run away now, or I shall have Mrs. Bloxom scolding me!"

In a few minutes old Mr. Peter Sugden comes smiling in, leaning on his daughter-in-law's arm on one side, and his stick on the other. For he and Violet have become great friends, and ever since the latter's first morning at The Towers the old gentleman has gone in regularly to sit with her for about an hour. And sometimes Violet will read to him, or they will sit chatting for a time; and as Mr. Peter's pet theme is his favourite grandson, Duke, the old gentleman finds in Violet a very attentive and appreciative listener.

"Ah! we shall miss him while he is away, shall

we not, my dear?" And he nods gravely over his spectacles at Violet. "There is no one so thoughtful, no one so tender-hearted and careful for the weak as Duke, God bless him! No one's arm is so steady and strong as his, either. You have found that out, I'll be bound!" and Mr. Peter shakes his head and smiles at Violet, while she blushes a little and laughs also.

On examination of his patient's ankle, Dr. Moore is so well satisfied that he gives his consent to her trying to take a few steps, and if the trial proves perfectly successful he sees no reason why she should not go downstairs and be present at the dance on the evening of the twenty-third.

This news is so delightful to Violet that she can think of nothing else for the rest of the day; and when, towards five o'clock, Mrs. Vereker, with Cinthy and Geoff, arrive to tea,—having been asked by Mrs. Sugden as a little surprise for Violet, —she takes an early opportunity of imparting the intelligence to her mother. And presently, when the two are alone together for a few minutes, Violet says, breathlessly:

"Mother, I want to look very nice—I mean, be

very nicely dressed on the twenty-third. What can I wear, do you think?"

"Well, dear," says Mrs. Vereker, smiling at her daughter's earnestness, "you have several very pretty dresses."

"Oh, but nothing nice enough for then! I want something different—something more important, I mean. Remember, Mother, I am eighteen now, and if it were the season in London I should be coming out."

"Yes, dear; that is true. Then I suppose the fact is, Violet, you want a new dress for this occasion?"

Violet nods, her eyes shining with excitement.

"There will be time, won't there?"

"Oh, yes! plenty: if I write up at once. Have you thought of anything you should like?"

"Yes, I have, Mother. Don't be startled now; and pray don't speak till I have finished. I want you to let me have a white satin, trimmed, only a little, with white ostrich-feather trimming! and—if anything else at all—just a dash of silver mixed with it somewhere!"

Mrs. Vereker gasps.

"But, my dear Violet! that would be really a very expensive dress!"

"Never mind, Mother; I would take tremendous care of it; and I shouldn't spoil it with dancing, you know!"

Here Mr. Vereker comes in, with Cinthy and Geoff, and Mabel and Eva Sugden, all of whom he has come across in the park, playing rounders. So the question is referred to him, and he immediately ranges himself on Violet's side, and votes for the new gown. Then there is some fun over Violet's first attempts at walking: Jim Sugden and Geoff offering themselves as "walking-sticks"! But there is such immoderate laughter over the offer even, that Violet declines their assistance with thanks, and in the end it is Mr. Vereker and Mr. Sugden, who guide her first cautious steps across the room.

CHAPTER XXI.

"PRIDE GOES BEFORE A FALL."

THE morning of the twenty-third breaks cold and frosty as ever; and as Iris Fairfax walks down the carriage drive of The Towers on her way to see Violet, she pulls her handsome furs closer round her, and shivers a little.

"We shall have quite a long spell of skating if this lasts," she says to herself. "Oh, Mr. Sugden, how you made me jump!" For Duke suddenly emerges from a by-path, and comes up with outstretched hand.

"I am so glad to see you again," he says. "When did you arrive, and what have you done with your husband?"

"We arrived last night, and Charley is stopping behind at the gate-house with your brother Jim," she answers, laughing. "He would persist in going in to inquire after old Peggy's rheumatism! Well, we may as well walk on: you are going home, I suppose?"

So they stroll on together: talking of the

weather, her and Charley's visit to Scotland, and presently of the dance which is to take place the same evening, and to which she and her husband are also bidden, with The Willows party.

"And Violet will really be present this time!" says Lady Fairfax presently. "How is she, Mr. Sugden?"

"I think she is very well, Lady Fairfax; and her ankle is almost recovered. You will be having her home again ere long now!" And Duke sighs.

Iris looks at him narrowly, a world of sympathy shining in her clear blue eyes; and in another moment she lays her hand upon his arm.

"Do not go in yet," she says, in an earnest voice. "I want so much to speak to you, Mr. Sugden. And please do not think me intrusive, but—my mother has told me all about—about you and Violet. I mean," she continues desperately, "that you love Violet, and—that you think she does not return your affection. No! do not interrupt me!" she cries, holding up her hand. "Mother has told me, also, of your intention to go abroad; and oh! I want to beg you not to go,

that is not yet, until you can judge better. You think my sister does not care for you; but though I know she has given you only too good reason to think so, poor unhappy child, I am sure that you are mistaken!"

"I wish I could think so, Lady Fairfax!" answers Duke sadly.

"Oh, but you may! you may indeed!" she cries earnestly. "Ah, do not throw away your own happiness and hers through taking things too much for granted, when it is nothing but this wretched barrier of pride between you still! Oh! I cannot express myself as I would wish," she continues with trembling voice; "but so many lives have been wrecked, just for want of a word or two; a little patience, or an explanation! And —I am so happy myself, that I want to see you and Violet happy too!" And as Iris ceases speaking, she turns away her head for a moment.

Duke cannot speak for a few seconds, but he grasps the small gloved hand which is nearest to him, and then in a husky voice—

"Thank you, thank you," he says, "for your

kind words, and—your sympathy, Lady Fairfax. But alas! I fear it is you who are mistaken."

Iris stands still in the middle of the path and confronts him.

"Mr. Sugden," she says, "you are becoming as tiresome as Violet herself! I shall now be compelled, unwillingly, to prove to you what you will not believe from me! But I suppose you will not doubt your own eyes. And she hands him a small scrap of paper, on which are scrawled, in a hand which is unmistakably Violet's, a number of letters, which are as incomprehensible to Duke at first as any Chinese puzzle; until after staring wildly at a goodly collection of "V. M. S.'s" in different styles and forms, his eyes next light upon a bold, dashing signature—"Violet M. Sugden."

"Well?" says Iris rather maliciously, after watching Duke's speaking face for a minute. "I feel horribly mean over this; and Violet, if she knew it, would never forgive me! But you forced me to do it. And now, I suppose I must tell you how I came by that paper. I was in a hurry for an envelope one day, and finding none in my own

writing-case, I turned over Violet's, and that fell out! Now, am I mistaken, or are you?" And leaving him standing, still studying the magic piece of paper, Iris waves her hand, and hurries on to the house.

Not many minutes later, there is a merry little party collected round Violet in the boudoir, consisting of Sir Charles and Lady Fairfax, Duke and Jim Sugden. Cinthy and Geoff, having followed quickly on their sister's heels, are there also, the former to bring Violet some news about her dress.

Charley, having relieved his anxiety about Peggy's rheumatism, appears to be in a meditative frame of mind; and sits, very silent and grave, attentively studying Violet's face.

"Do you know," he presently says to his wife, and still looking thoughtfully at Violet, "I never look at that girl over there now, without thinking of some verses which I came across the other day, in some infantile book or other. I really think I must recite them for the benefit of the company, for it seems to me that they so exactly fit Violet, and—er, the situation, generally. The

verses would sound better coming from Duke, undoubtedly, but as Duke does not know them, I must e'en recite them myself!" And Charley, throwing himself back in his chair, and gazing up at the ceiling, recites with dramatic effect:

"'PRIDE GOES BEFORE A FALL!

'Once I met a little lady,
She was proud and she was shy;
So I smiled and said, "Good morning!"
But her lip was curled in scorning,
And her head was held up high.

'She would pass me without notice,
This her manner showed full well;
But a stone lay just before her,
Where her proud feet quickly bore her—
There she tripped, and there she fell!

'Oh! I heard that scornful lady—
She did sob and she did cry;
So I smiled, and said, "I'll help you!"
Though she pouted, she said, "Thank you!"
Soon I kissed her tears dry.'

"Substitute 'slide' for 'stone'," adds Charley hastily, "and I think you will agree with me that the whole thing tallies very neatly!"

If a bomb had fallen into the midst of the little

party, it could scarcely have caused more consternation than does this little childish poem, given out in Charley's usual languid voice. Iris looks as nearly angry with him as it is possible for her to be, and Duke crosses over hastily to the window, while Jim and Cinthy bend over the newspaper together, struggling wildly to smother their laughter! Only Geoff bursts into a loud and boisterous laugh, which is promptly quenched, however, by his eldest sister. Poor Violet, with crimson face, and trembling fingers, which she vainly tries to steady as she rearranges some flowers near her, is sorely tempted to burst out crying; but as Iris, seeing this, and feeling heartily sorry for her sister, moves to her side, she makes a prodigious effort to compose herself, and looks up gratefully, with a rather tremulous smile.

"I must be going now, Violet," says Lady Fairfax calmly. "It is later than I thought. Have you any message for Mother?"

Violet shakes her head; and her sister continues: "I will leave Cinthy with you for a little while, but you had better come with us, Geoff.

Now, are you two gentlemen going to escort me downstairs?" She looks at Duke and Jim as she speaks, and they instantly dart forward to open the door. Thus Iris clears the room of everyone but Violet and Cinthy, and, still full of suppressed indignation, leads the way downstairs.

When they have left the house she tells Geoff without ceremony to go on home by himself, and then she turns to her husband:

"How could you, Charley?" she asks severely. "Now, you have undone all the good that I hoped I had just done!"

"Oh, nonsense, my dear!" returns Charley, perfectly unabashed. "You do not think I recited those lines without a purpose, do you? Why, my dear girl, the very fact of my having done so will bring those two together as much as if I had joined their hands and said 'God bless you, my children'!"

Iris cannot help laughing in spite of herself, but she still pretends to be very angry, and scolds Charley more or less all the way home.

At the same moment Duke and Jim stand together on the front steps; the latter nobly

striving to check the merriment he cannot help feeling at the expression of half vexation, half amusement which still rests upon his brother's face.

"Upon my word, Duke, that was a good hit of Charley's!" he remarks.

"Charley is an ass!" says Duke curtly, as he turns and walks back into the hall.

"Oh! by the way, Duke," says Jim, following him; "perhaps you will kindly take up your duties again, now that you are home? I do not like carrying about young women who do not want to be carried about—by me, that is! And more particularly do I object to it when I am accused afterwards of scraping their arms in the process!"

"Oh, certainly!" answers Duke dryly. "But I understood that Miss Vereker had permission to walk now?"

"Yes, so she has; with a strong walking-stick —such as yourself, Duke! You have been home again a couple of days now, and you have been abominably lazy in this respect; and—I only want to warn you, you know—Miss Vereker is

to come down to early dinner to-day, as a sort of practice for the evening, and if you don't bring her down she will just have to stay where she is! For the pater is out, and I am not going to!"

And having stated his views on the subject, Jim strolls off with his hands in his pockets.

. . . . . .

It is close upon nine o'clock: and Violet, in a flutter of excitement, sits ready dressed, and waiting like a good child, as she tells herself smilingly, to be "fetched" downstairs. Even as the little French clock upon the mantel-piece chimes out the hour, the door opens and Duke enters. He pauses for a moment on the threshold, however, amazed at this vision in white satin, which smiles an expectant welcome at him! For though, to tell the truth, he had been duly wondering what Violet would wear, and how she would look in evening dress; his wildest thoughts had never soared beyond what he called to himself "those thin, flimsy things which girls generally wear!" which might reasonably be expected to mean muslins. And here sits a

fashionably-gowned, imposing-looking young lady, whose bright hair is arranged after a fashion of her own in a cluster of cunning little curls and waves, infinitely becoming to the sparkling, happy face beneath, as also to the slim, white neck on which a single row of pearls is clasped.

Duke restrains his inclination to gasp, and comes forward into the room.

"I see you are ready!" he remarks. "You got my flowers?" And he glances at a lovely posy on the table.

"Oh! did you send them?" asks Violet innocently. "Thank you so much, Mr. Sugden. They are lovely. Do—do you like my dress?" she cannot resist asking. And then she rises and spreads out her skirts, stepping back a little as she does so.

"Oh, take care!" cries Duke, springing forward. "Pray, do not be rash, Miss Vereker. Yes, I like your dress. It is simple, and yet—I suppose, one would say, elegant."

"Yes, I think it is nice," she says, with a little pardonable pride. "And now, will you please

take me in to your grandfather; I have promised to show myself to him? Oh, wait a minute! my flowers, thanks! There, now I am ready."

Old Mr. Peter Sugden is almost as surprised as his grandson at the imposing appearance which Violet presents in her satin and feathers.

"Why, bless my soul!" he cries; "you have blossomed into quite a fashionable young lady, my dear! It's a lucky thing for you, Duke, my boy, that she cannot dance to-night, or she would have her programme full before you could get a chance!—eh, Miss Violet?"

But here Mabel comes rushing upstairs, to say that if Violet wants to get down quietly, she had better go at once, as the time (for it is "country hours" to-night) is getting on.

So down the three go, along the palm and flower-bedecked staircase; Violet, supported by Duke's strong arm on one side, and clinging to the bannisters on the other, in preference to her stick, which she hands over to Mabel for the moment, calling her "her gold stick in waiting!" Once Violet catches sight of her own reflection in a long mirror on the landing, and for a

moment she is startled, wondering who this well-dressed, fashionable-looking young woman can be? But seeing that this same young woman is leaning on the arm of Duke, whose face and figure are both certainly familiar to her, she concludes that the person in white satin must be none other than herself.

In due time, going step by step, slowly and cautiously, they presently arrive in the drawing-room, which is cleared for the dancing. One of the most comfortable sofas has been allowed to remain in the room, however, on the end of which Mrs. Sugden tells Violet she can allow any privileged friend to sit. There is also a little table, on which are arranged her flowers, fan, and programme. Here Violet is at once established, and presently she holds quite a little court. First, of all the entire Sugden family, who are standing about waiting to receive their guests; then, amongst the very earliest arrivals, come the Verekers, four in number, for Mrs. Sugden has insisted on Cinthy and Geoff coming, as well as a few other young people, it being Christmas time, and for the same reason she is allowing

Mabel and Eva to appear. With the Verekers come also Sir Charles and Lady Fairfax. But Violet will not take much notice of Charley, who, however, does not appear conscious of being in disgrace, on principle. By and by the guests begin to arrive in large numbers, and then for a time Violet is left to herself, and at liberty to look about her; admiring the beautiful floral decorations, the prettily arranged lights, and lastly, the gay and brilliant dresses of the visitors. No one, however, looks so nice in her opinion as either Iris or Cinthy; the former being arrayed in some soft, clinging, white material, with gold about it, which falls in graceful folds about her tall, slim figure; the latter, in a pretty, simple toilette of plain white silk, with edgings of swansdown. Then Violet hears the band tuning up from some sheltered nook, where it has been stowed away so that the music therefrom may sound more subdued; and in the confusion of the discordant sounds, she is startled to hear Duke's voice close beside her.

"Give me your programme!" he commands briefly.

"Why, whatever for?" she inquires laughing, but doing as she is bidden. Then he shows her his. About half of it is filled in with different initials, and while Violet glances over it, he rapidly fills in all the blanks with V. V.'s.

"But I can't dance!" cries Violet, who is merry and at her ease even with Duke this evening.

"No; but I can sit the dances out. These," pointing to all the others, "are duty dances—excepting those with your two sisters. Ah! by the way, your initials are 'V. M. V.', are they not?" And Duke laughs softly as he remembers the "V. M. S.'s" reposing in his pocket at that moment.

"What are you laughing at, Mr. Sugden?" demands Violet, trying to be dignified.

"Only thoughts, Miss Vereker," replies Duke, still smiling. "Ah, there begins number one of my duty dances! So I must be off. *Auf wiederseh'n.*"

Aunt Eliza comes up at that moment, and takes the vacated seat at Violet's side. And the two have plenty of fun together, watching

the varied styles and manners of the different dancers.

Once, when slowly eating an ice which has been brought to her, and watching the dancers rather wistfully, Violet sighs and says:

"Oh, I wish I could have just one waltz!"

"So do I!" replies Duke quickly.

"But you can!"

"Yes; but not with you," he returns in a low voice. But here someone calls him away, and Mrs. Vereker comes up and sits down by Violet.

"My love, you are beginning to look pale and tired," she says. "Remember, you cannot be strong, after being shut up for so long. Why do you not slip away quietly, as you will not be going into the supper-room?"

"Do I look tired, Mother? Yes, I suppose I am—a little. But I want to stay just a few minutes longer. I won't stay long—really."

But Duke, who has watched the bright face growing paler ever since that wistful remark about the waltz, makes his way over to the sofa without loss of time.

"Miss Vereker," he says, "you must let me take you away out of this noise and heat; you are looking pale, and almost ill!"

Violet turns a little, weary, wistful look upon him, but she shakes her head, at the same time possessing herself of her flowers, however.

But Duke rises, and holds out his hand.

"Come!" he says.

And Violet goes without another word. And the two cross the room, and pass up the staircase together so quietly that scarcely anyone notices their departure until they see that the sofa is tenantless. Having reached the boudoir, Duke places his charge upon the sofa—which someone has drawn up close to the fire—and then leans upon the mantel-piece, his heart full of a happiness born of the fragment of paper in his pocket, watching Violet intently as she sits, pale and trembling, and nervously touching the blossoms in her fast-fading posy.

Presently Duke remembers one of his "duties", still unfulfilled; and going down upon his knees proceeds to dive under the sofa for a footstool, which he drags out, and places under the strained

foot. As he does so, Violet turns away her head, for now that all the excitement of the evening is over her spirits have gone down with a run, and her nerves are so unstrung that she feels more like crying than anything else.

"Had you not better be returning?" she asks, in a voice which trembles slightly; while her fingers absently stroke the blossoms in her lap. I—I shall be all right now, thank you!"

Duke does not answer for a moment; but presently he takes the posy away from her, and putting it on a chair, says

"Never mind the flowers! look at me, Violet. Dear, can you give me another answer now to the question I asked you once before? Nay, do not draw your hands away, and oh, hush! do not cry. I will say no more if you wish it?"

But the earnest, pleading look in Duke's eyes, which she meets for one brief instant, sweeps away the last little bit of pride left to her, and laying her head upon the arm which is already round her, she sobs out:

"Oh, Duke, Duke! I have been hoping you would ask me again! But oh! I was afraid you

would not; that you could not forget my unkindness and—and wickedness! Oh pray, pray forgive me, for I am so miserable!"

"My dearest, there is nothing to forgive! And do not say you are miserable now! Do we not at length understand one another, Violet?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" And the girl struggles for composure as she yields to his embrace, and even tries to smile when he whispers:

"And may I illustrate the last line of Charley's poem?"

And Violet submits meekly, as indeed she seems inclined to do in all things, now that that formerly insurmountable barrier has lost all its foundations, and has come tumbling down to the ground. But presently she looks up, smiling archly.

"That was mean of Charley," she says.

"Yes. But I believe he did it from a good motive; to try and bring us together, dear. But he was not half so successful as your sister. It was Lady Fairfax who made me happy again, for she proved to me that I was mistaken in thinking you did not love me, Violet."

"Duke! how? what do you mean?"

"She gave me—this!" he says simply, handing her the scrap of paper.

"Oh, Duke!" and the poor girl hides her face upon his shoulder. "How could she? how could she? I will never forgive her! Pray, let me burn it!"

"That is just what Lady Fairfax said you would say!" returns Duke, laughing. "But you will forgive her, Violet; in your own little heart you are every bit as grateful to her as I am. No, give that paper to me, if you please! It is one of the most valuable things I possess. I shall keep it always, and perhaps—in the future, I shall bring it up against you, if you are not good and obedient, say!"

At this moment Nell comes hurrying up; and though she starts a little at seeing her brother in such close proximity to Violet, she says, with admirable self-possession:

"Duke, Mother says she is awfully sorry, but you really must come down and take Lady Mary Villiers in to supper."

"Hang Lady Mary Villiers!" cries Duke.

"Yes, I know, dear; but it must be done. I will take care of Violet."

"Yes, dear Nell, take good care of her, for she is going to be your sister, and—my wife," and he draws the two girls together.

"Oh, Violet! Duke! I am so glad, so glad!" and she embraces the girl rapturously, and then seizing her brother round the neck, hugs him till he cries for mercy.

"Lady Mary Villiers must wait a few minutes," he remarks, when he has recovered his breath, and ascertained that his tie has not suffered; "for I am going to fetch my mother here—now, at once!" And he is off before Nell can stop him.

And Mrs. Sugden, seeing with one glance at her son's face what has happened, slips out of the room unobserved and hurries upstairs with him.

Violet has risen when they enter the room, and stands supporting herself by Nell's arm, a pretty flush of expectation on her hitherto pale face. And when Duke takes her and places her in his mother's arms, Mrs. Sugden says brokenly:

"God bless you, my daughter! You have made me almost as happy as you have my son. Alas! we can neither of us stay now, but I will send Duke back to you the moment he can be spared, and in the meantime your mother shall come to you." And, kissing her fondly, she hurries away.

From that moment it is ceaseless congratulations; for first one, then another comes, till Violet runs a chance of sharing St. Valentine's fate, for she is nearly kissed to death.

Her own mother's and father's fond words of blessing go far, however, towards soothing her overstrung nerves, and her face lights up with pride and happiness when Mr. Vereker says, with his hand upon her head:

"There is no one to whom I would give you so willingly, my child!"

And Iris comes, and squeezing her sister's hand says:

"Forgive me, Vi, dear. I could not help it; for you were both fast drifting on to shipwreck, and I could not stand by and see it."

Cinthy kisses her sister in rather a stately manner, feeling, as she confides to Mabel after-

wards, that she cannot see why the whole matter was not settled long ago, and that then they might have had a wedding in autumn weather, instead of ice and snow! thereby showing that she quite expects her sister's marriage to take place at once, off-hand.

Only Charley pretends to be sulky over it all, for he takes all the credit of the final understanding between the affianced pair to himself, while Iris boldly declares that it is her doing, and that he had nothing whatever to do with it.

Geoff is inclined to be too hilarious, if anything, requiring to be snubbed down, as Charley says, not infrequently.

But presently Duke returns, and seeing quickly how great a strain all this excitement is proving to Violet, without more ado he turns everybody out of the room excepting his own mother and father and Mr. and Mrs. Vereker. Soon the two last-named leave also, however, and then Nell is allowed to return, and while she, and Mr. and Mrs. Sugden, and Aunt Eliza, sit down to a dainty little supper which has been prepared up there for Violet and a chosen few, Duke insists

upon his fiancée resting quietly on the sofa, while he waits upon her with a tenderness and devotion which more than once brings tears to her eyes. And when Mr. Sugden presently rises, glass in hand, and proposes "health and happiness to the future Mrs. Marmaduke Sugden", a glance passes between the two; for the thoughts of each fly back to that scrap of paper which once more reposes in Duke's pocket, and they feel that this is a mutual secret—their first, and to be shared by no one else.

. . . . . .

When, some six months later, Violet Sugden, a happy bride, enters the doors of The Towers upon her husband's arm, Duke turns to her with a smile upon his lips. "Welcome," he says, "to your husband's home, my wife!" And Violet, by a bright, upward glance, and a little quick pressure of her husband's arm, answers Duke in a manner which perfectly satisfies him.

. . . . . .

As the season advances, amongst the list of presentations to Her Majesty at the last Drawing-Room may be read:

"Lady Charles Fairfax, on her marriage, by the Dowager Lady Fairfax."

And lower down, amongst the S.'s:

"Mrs. Marmaduke Sugden, on her marriage, by her sister, Lady Charles Fairfax."

THE END.

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